



CONFLICT OF WINGS

About this book

In Norfolk, amongst the flat Broads country, lies the Island of Children. This island, which was in Roman times a children's cemetery—hence its name—is now regarded by the local people as a place of peace and a bird sanctuary.

The R.A.F. crews and staff who man the aerodrome nearby are known and liked in the village, particularly Bill, who is 'walking out' with Sally, the light-house-keeper's daughter. So when the Ministry decides to take over the Island of Children and to give it to the local R.A.F. Squadron for bombing practice prior to sending them abroad on active service, loyalties are indeed divided, and the people of the village fight a bitter battle for their island.

This is a story about England and the Air Force at peace. Jet fighters scream out of the sky, but in the village beneath the old life goes on. This is the novel from which was made the colour film *Conflict of Wings*.

Conflict of Wings

A NOVEL BY
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To
HERBERT MASON
who produced the film
&
JOHN PUDNEY
who worked with me on
the screenplay

CONFLICT OF WINGS

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CHAPTER I

[1]

IT is a lonely village, Saltingsby, standing there at the very end of the long ribbon of road that winds for mile after flat mile across the marshes from the distant city of Norwich.

Where the road begins in ancient Norwich all is bustle and hurry. Shops and offices crowd in upon the road, lamp-posts make public its every yard, the telephone wires enmesh and the hoardings enclose it. The sky is a small and unfamiliar thing glimpsed fleetingly between the roof-tops. But the prisoner road will not be contained and heads north, climbs slightly to pass the prosperous houses of worried people, and begins its journey towards freedom.

Soon, very soon, the houses have dropped back from the roadside and its nearest companions are the rows of pines running for a brief while to escort it along its way.

But it is not the absence of the shops, the lamp-posts, and the hoardings that you notice: what you notice is something you have acquired. A wide, friendly, sheltering thing that is the sky.

The road streams on through this breezy morning of early Spring. The country is lazy here with the small, slow movements of farmers seen distantly in large fields. Horses and cattle amble, there is a world of time. The land is small and rounded, everything is sheltered.

Soon the starlings, spectator-like along the telegraph wires, give way to drifting gulls and you have reached the river. The river flows east and so the road, crossing a bridge, turns towards where the sun has lately been and speeds on its way.

The river is not alone here. Small, neat houses with small, neat gardens watch its first miles, and the road runs behind these week-end places not wishing to be stared at like the river. The hills become wider now and the sky is broader too. On goes the road past solid farmhouses, huge barns, and old, very old, churches. And then, suddenly, you are on the top of the last low hill and a new world is before you. For here begin the marshlands—that flat region of fen and water and sky known as Broadland.

The road drops down, and reaching the edge of a river appears to slacken its pace. There is no hurry now. Here on the marshes there is an inevitability in the progress of time that renders futile any human hurryings. You go slowly now, even on this spring morning, for all about you is a world you have not known before. A flat world. It seems at first to be reeds, reeds, and more reeds. Then the road twists and you are skirting a wide, open stretch of water, a Norfolk Broad. The water shimmers and glints in the sun and then comes almost wholly to life as something startles from its surface hundreds upon hundreds of birds. Slowly they get up, treading along the surface to force themselves into flight. They wheel and come back across the road and the air is full of their passing. Canada geese, mallard, teal and widgeon are there in the greatest numbers.

You go on, and on one side the reeds give way to wet, green marshes, marshes that are slow with cattle. A small stone bridge carries you across a high-banked river, and then every hundred yards or so the road crosses a dyke. All about you is the water: water in river and stream and dyke and broad and mere. There is no place where you are not on an island.

You leave behind you, where a river divides and turns north, the last small village gathered about its square-towered church. You follow the river north and then begin a wide sweeping curve to the east. The last side-road is gone, branching off towards Fallowfield. You are entering a wild, enchanted place, a place of lonely beauty. You stop for a moment and hear the sounds that will never leave you again. The first sound is all about you, for even on the stillest day when no breath of air stirs them, the reeds whisper ceaselessly across the marshes. And then you are aware of that other sound, low and persistent, a steady murmur broken only now and then by a slap. Is there a note of menace in it? You can't place the unseen sound and so you go slowly on. On under that high, wide sky where the small white clouds sail steadily and where the air is never void of birds. Away in the reed beds a pheasant crows. You cross yet another dyke and a snipe gets up in erratic flight. But there are only the birds—you see no more of man. On you go through the silence . . . yes, silence it is, for even the sougling of the reeds and the sudden lonely call of a wild goose do not break the silence—they increase it. Where is the road going? The other sound is coming nearer now and as the road completes its wide sweep you seem to be running

beside the sound. Still the reeds and the water stretch away on one side of you, but on the other side a thin wood has appeared. You follow it for a brief while and then just where it ends, and just as you are thinking that surely the sky cannot ever be wider or higher, the road twists suddenly and you are in Saltingsby. You stand quite still at the unexpectedness of it. It is one of the unforgettable moments, finding this grey little windy village standing solitary amid all this untamed beauty.

And then you know what that other sound is—it is the sea. For just behind the thin sandhills which shelter Saltingsby is the grey North Sea.

This is the end of the road—there is no other place for it to reach.

[2]

Sally came over the brow of the sandhills, down the path through the marram-grass, and into the village. The street, no more than fifty yards in length, led to Mrs. Thompson's general store and post office which stood on the edge of the Open Place about which the village was grouped. As she came down the street she could glimpse ahead of her, beyond the Open Place, the waters shining away towards Wadely Broad. The village looked quiet and peaceful as always.

The thought had hardly come to her before she was aware of a sound of voices raised in angry agreement. It sounded as though quite a number of people were gathered. Then she grinned to herself as she recognised the voice of Harry Tilney bellowing above the others.

She wondered what had raised the big boat-builder's anger this time. Probably another notice, she surmised. Notices always made Harry Tilney angry. Notices of new regulations or restrictions, even notices calling for a Mass Meeting of Protest. A notice was a sign that someone—usually someone in authority—was seeking to impose their will on him. A thing no rebel could tolerate.

By the church wall, sure enough, a small group of people stood gathered in front of the notice-board. From their attitude it appeared that something serious was claiming their attention. She hurried to join them, smiling in passing at the old men sitting on the seat by the store. Always when the sun was shining the old men sat there and talked of the winters that were past.

The villagers greeted her conventionally as she pushed through them to read the notice on the board. But, she noted, there was a certain reserve in their greeting. The way people are reserved when they know you are about to receive bad news. She had time only to wonder at the brief look of sympathy from Fanny Bates, the publican's daughter, before reading the notice.

As is the way in important things, the notice was brief.

MINISTRY FOR LAND ACQUISITION

The Air Ministry has applied to purchase an area of land, known locally as the ISLAND OF CHILDREN, for the purpose of an Air Firing Range.

Any Local Authorities or individuals having legitimate objections to the purchase of the land for

this purpose should make them known at once to the nearest officer of the Ministry for Land Acquisition.

There followed a brief description of the location and boundaries of the land.

Sally read the notice through and then read the first paragraphs again before she fully grasped just what the notice meant.

She turned to look at the faces of the village people grouped about her. Silent, sympathetic faces.

"Can they do this?" Her voice was bewildered.

"Damned Government," growled Harry Tilney. "Anyone would think they ran the country."

"They just take what they want these days. Nothing you can do about it." This from Joe Bates, the publican. "Before we know it, beer will be rationed. Register at a local pub, that's what you'll have to do."

"Can they do it?" Sally repeated. "Just take any land they want?"

"Reckon they can if it's for defence purposes," stated Tom Wade, who had been the only local man to win decorations in the Army.

"But why the Island of Children? Why not some other land? There must be plenty of other places they could use for a range."

"It would have to be on the coast," Tom Wade pointed out.

The group considered this in silence for a moment. They all knew how Sally felt about the Island of Children. Every one of them had known the place since childhood. The legends and stories surrounding it were part of their background. But though they were

familiar with the area, they knew that Sally, daughter of the lighthouse-keeper, loved the place. And it always seemed right to them that she should feel this way. They could never have put their thoughts about it into words, but it was a feeling that in the same way as the Island of Children belonged to the history of Norfolk, so Sally belonged to the Island of Children.

But was there any other suitable land in this coastal area? Away to the north, beyond the wood, were the cattle marshes and the sugar-beet lands. Behind the village lay the marshes where the local farmers' cattle grazed. These marshes ran south until they merged into the Island of Children. Below this area was the impenetrable place where a forest of reeds occupied what had once been a shallow broad. And beyond the edge of this dense tangle lay the only high ground, on which the lighthouse had been built. Southward from the lighthouse, the marshes were again heavy with crops and cattle. No, if there was any other piece of vacant land adjoining the sea, then it must be many miles distant.

Harry Tilney was the first to give the girl an answer.

"That's not the point," he roared. "It doesn't matter if there is any other land or not. The fact is that the land is ours, and now a bunch of damned public servants in London are trying to take it from us. Well, we're not going to let them!" He glared around at the group waiting for someone to contradict him. "Norfolk never should be under a London government anyway," he added. There was no reaction to this idea. They had all heard it too often.

"What are we going to do?" asked Joe Bates tentatively.

"Bookie!" exclaimed Sally. "He is a solicitor, or at least he used to be. He'll know what to do."

"He's away," said Mrs. Thompson, the storekeeper. "He went suddenly last night. He left a note for you and your father," she added to Sally.

"When is he coming back?" someone asked.

"He didn't say. But I gathered it might not be for some weeks."

Sally went with Mrs. Thompson into the store to collect the note. The rest of the group stood about undecidedly, waiting for someone to give them a lead.

The publican was the first to speak. "If it's the squadron over at Fallowfield who want the range, you could go over and talk to them," he suggested to Harry Tilney.

Fallowfield was the Royal Air Force station situated some miles away across the marshes. In the summer, officers and men from the airfield came down to swim from the beaches behind Saltingsby. And several of them were all-the-year-round visitors, well known to everyone in the village. The Squadron Commander and the Station Adjutant regularly used Joe Bates' pub in the evening. And young Bill Morris and his chum, Buster—almost every half-day's leave they had was spent with Sally and Fanny, daughter of the publican. The Air Force men were well liked.

"Squadron Leader Parsons would understand about the Island of Children. You could talk to him," suggested Fanny Bates.

"Yes. He's a nice bloke," agreed her father. And as an afterthought he added, "He always drinks gin."

Tom Wade knew more about Service matters,

though, and proceeded to advise them. "It has nothing to do with Squadron Leader Parsons. It's an administrative matter. The Station Commander is the one you want to see. The Group Captain."

They all accepted without argument that Tom would be right on this. He'd won two decorations during the African and Italian campaigns. You can't argue on military matters with a man who has won two medals.

Harry Tilney agreed to see the Group Captain at Fallowfield the next morning, and, satisfied that this was the correct action to take, the group dispersed. Most of them went back to the jobs they had been doing before the notice went up. Fanny Bates called into the store to tell Sally and Mrs. Thompson what had been decided, then hurried off after her father. In a moment the Open Place was bare of people—except for the old men sitting on the seat in the sun.

The old men hadn't made the effort yet to rise and read the notice. Notices meant affairs of the present and future. They had no present or future, only a past. A glorious past that acquired more glory with each repetition of their tales. Tales that the young people of the village had heard time and time again. Tales of cold, bleak dawns on the marshes when they waited with gun and dog for the first faint light that would bring their targets winging in from the sea. Tales of ever-increasing bags in the year of the record coot shoot over on Hickling Broad. And the winters they told of, always increasing them in severity until it seemed that the Norfolk rivers must once have been solid ice through most of the year.

They sat there now as Sally came out of the store. She paused for a moment to look out over the marshes, a troubled expression on her young face. The old men couldn't know what was worrying her as they watched her standing there immobile, with her short hair blowing about her face. It was the only movement in her, and they wondered again at the calmness and stillness in one who was yet so young. The quality of serenity lay in her calm grey eyes gazing steadily out from below slightly arched brows, and there was a serious assurance in the firm line of her chin. It was only when you caught the humorous corners to her mouth or that inquisitive quiver at the tip of her nose that you waited to hear the laughter that must surely be lurking not far below.

They waited now for that glad smile—and it came. Sally's attention came back to the present, and as she moved off across the Open Place she smiled and called gaily to them.

The old men watched her hurrying lightly away.

The one on the left spoke first. "She's growing taller. Five foot four now, I reckon."

"Five foot five," said the man on the right who always went one better.

"That's tall for a girl of eighteen," affirmed the first speaker.

"She'll be nineteen at the end of summer," argued the man on the right.

"About average for a Norfolk girl," ruled the man in the middle, who always kept peace between the other two.

"She's half Suffolk."

"She was born in Norfolk."

"But her father came from Suffolk."

"She has never been out of Norfolk."

The peacemaker intervened again. "She'd never leave Norfolk," he declared.

A moment of silence as the other two considered this, and then the old man on the left began to argue again.

"She's always about with that young airman."

"But it can't be serious. He's a Londoner!"

"Well, she's half Suffolk."

The debate might never have ended if at that moment Joe Bates hadn't opened the bar of the King's Head. The old men rose stiffly and walked out of the sunshine towards their morning bitter.

[3]

Sally went along the path that ran between the side of the pub and the edge of the mere. Where the waters ended the reeds began, and the path twisted damply through them until in a few yards Sally was in a shoulder-high jungle. Then she came out into a small clearing round the end of an inlet. Here the villagers kept their boats. Some of them were riding now on the water, others were pulled up on the turf, while yet others sheltered in the small reed-roofed boathouses which stood with their feet in the water. The path wound along past the small dinghies and punts, past where the big launch with the tall mast was moored, and beyond the row of boathouses clustered at the head

of the arm of water. Ahead of her lay Harry Tilney's boatyard, a group of sheds bunched about the top of a concrete hard. She noticed in passing the progress that had been made on the launch on the stocks, and then, answering a greeting from the two workmen, she hurried on. Soon she was among the reeds again, but only briefly. Then the path pushed out into the wide, sunlit spaces. She was on the marshes.

As she walked, the sandhills stretched before her on the left. White at the crest, with tall, steely grass growing under the lee, they swept down sharply until small dark bushes growing along the base seemed to check their descent and cause them to slow away into a flatness that soon became the peaty marshes. The flatness went on and on, across the path that Sally had taken, on to where the low screen of willows outlined the waters of Wadely Broad distantly on her right. Now as she walked the ground rose very slightly and a river appeared to move out from the far end of Wadely Broad and curve in to meet her. She had another mile to walk before she would reach the river. Then it would only be with her for a few hundred yards before it swung suddenly away again to join the other waters making the slow journey down to Yarmouth.

The path was not visible now, but Sally went on, finding the narrow planks that lay across the numerous dykes which glistened in formation along the marshlands. The breeze came in from the sea, the calling of the gulls blowing along upon it. A pair of duck, startled from a dyke, flew away to land with a splash on the next water, where a few moments later Sally again disturbed ~~them with~~ her passing.

The village was fast disappearing behind her now and she was alone in a flat world.

She had reached the river now, and mounted the bank that raised the waters a good dozen feet above the surrounding fenlands. She followed the river for several hundred yards, walking high above the world. Then, where the river began to swing away again, she left it and came down to the flat, tufty marshes. Here where she stood, she was not much more than half a mile from the sea and she could understand why the Air Force should choose this place for their range.

The area which the Norfolk people knew as the Island of Children spread away to the south of her. Looking at it now with different eyes, she saw the advantages it would have for its new purpose. Towards the sandhills the ground ran firmly for about a hundred yards and then became marshy again. Low trees and shrubs grew thickly among sudden pools and rivulets, making an almost impenetrable confusion amongst which the black-headed gulls bred. Bordering this, and swinging in a protective semicircle between it and the sandhills, the Small Wood stood up. An ancient wood, this, of invalid oaks and old ash trees, with here and there an alert silver birch to make the other trees look even more decrepit. This wood and the gulls' breeding-ground formed the northern end of the area. In the centre was a wide corridor of firm, springy ground, flat, open, and clear. This corridor was bounded, several hundred yards away to the south, by a large, completely land-locked, crescent-shaped patch of water. No trees edged this mere. Only the reeds knew where land ended and water began. Reeds growing so thickly that

you might fancy you could walk on them. They were everywhere, their grey-tipped golden stems mixed inextricably with the blue of the water. Even out in the centre of the mere where the water might expect to have its own world, the reeds joined in, coming up in small, regular clusters, row after row of them, until they resembled some vast, miniature fleet drawn up for review upon a silent and tideless ocean. But the golden fleet was not alone on the shallow blue. Always there were the birds. Sometimes in their dozens, more often in their hundreds, and not infrequently in their thousands they came through the varying seasons of the year. Resident birds and rare visitors, dozens of varieties, sharing the waters, but never quite mixing with each other. Coot and mallard and widgeon always in their hundreds. Smaller numbers of teal and cormorants. Heron from the Small Wood, which they shared with the woodcock. Regal kingfisher and common gull. Harrier, grebe, bittern, hawk and crow, all were on or about this water. All found sanctuary in the Island of Children.

Sally moved tentatively down into the central corridor and there stood still for a long, quiet moment that she might feel and hear it all about her. Gradually it came to her, that feeling of being alone in a great cathedral. Alone in a place where an ordained ritual would repeat and repeat itself until the end of time. That was the feeling. A dignity that came from an eternal rhythm that nothing could alter. She listened. The accompaniment was there, as always: the sea murmur and the reed music, touched softly now and then by contented cattle noises in the distance. Slowly

her gaze swept from north to south. The village was gone. Only the endless green wet marshes, the waving reeds, the blue waters, and the marching miles of sandhills remained. The world was flat under a high, high sky and she was the only person in the world. It was always so when she stood here in this place of ancient legend. She must tell Bill about the Island of Children. He would understand now. He seemed to understand more and more with every week he spent in Norfolk. Thought of Bill brought back thoughts of the Air Force, and the spell of the place faded quickly.

She moved on along the corridor towards the sandhills, keeping well clear of the gulls' breeding-ground, and skirting carefully around the southern end of the Small Wood where, she had recently noticed, the heron were again building their strange platforms. As she walked, the ground became firmer and warmer and soon sand began to appear amongst the drier grass.

The beach swung away from her to the north, an unbroken golden white strand except where, just below the old concrete pillbox in the gap behind Saltingsby, man had erected black timbered ribs to help in the battle of sea against sand.

Southward the beach ran cleanly away until a rocky point suddenly pushed out into the sea. High on a grassy mound above this point, stood the lighthouse. Tall, red and white, the lighthouse thrust up cleanly from the living quarters white about its base.

Sally's father, Old Circular as he was known to the people of Saltingsby, was pottering in the garden as Sally came up the path from the beach. A big man of about fifty years, with a crop of snowy white hair, and

a shambling walk that made him appear to be perpetually on the point of losing his balance. He had a way of not looking at you most of the time he was speaking, then darting a quick glance which seemed to ridicule all that you and he had said. Harry Tilney, for one, could never decide when he was talking sound sense or utter nonsense. With his appearance, his wary, almost detached look, and the slow Suffolk speech, one might be forgiven for the thought that here was a man too lazy to be a poet.

He listened now while Sally told him about the notice. Then he went back to grubbing the weeds from amongst the young plants.

"They'll get the land," he remarked. "If the Air Force want it, they'll get it."

"But Harry Tilney is going to tell them about it—tell them the history of it. They won't, they couldn't go ahead once they know about that, could they?"

"They might. It depends how urgently they think they need it."

"But we've always kept it as a sanctuary. It's been one for hundreds and hundreds of years. Once we tell them . . ."

Her father interrupted her. "Cassino was a sanctuary of learning for centuries, but someone dropped a bomb on it."

"But that was war."

"What does it matter? The alibi is still the same. Progress."

She couldn't follow his reasoning in this and said so. As always, he was willing to explain.

"Wars, my dear, are just milestones we have to

measure progress. Progress in engineering, medicine, and control of mass emotion. I don't doubt the word 'progress' will be mentioned if there is any dispute over the acquiring of this land. It's a wonderful word. More than a word really. It has become almost a licence granted to the conscience of Authority when it wishes to commit another robbery. Whenever we lose another right, or custom, or idea, it is always Progress. It has become a formula for killing individuality, not only in beliefs but in local ways and traditions, too." He had spoken quietly, continuing all the while with his gardening. Now he shot that disconcerting glance of his at her and added, "Of course, they wouldn't get away with it in Suffolk. There we'd find some way to diddle 'em!"

She had been listening seriously, but now couldn't help grinning at this favourite trick of his.

"Whereas the Norfolk people haven't enough spirit," she said, quoting one of his favourite themes.

"That's right," he grinned back at her.

Old Circular—no one remembered now how he had acquired the name—had lived in Norfolk for nearly thirty years. But he still maintained a vigorous contempt for all things Norfolk and never lost an opportunity for riling the people of Saltingsby by his devotion to Suffolk, his home county. Sally had been born in Norfolk and wholeheartedly joined in on the side of the Saltingsby people in any discussion on the merits of the two counties. But privately, with her father, she rather enjoyed the way he managed to score so frequently at their expense.

Sally became serious again. "They'll do something

this time," she promised him. "They were really angry about it. Even if the Group Captain won't listen to Harry Tilney, we'll find some way of stopping the land being turned into a target range."

She relaxed on the seat near her father. It was warm there in the sun, the light breeze adding a zest, a salty freshness, to the feeling of it on her bare legs and arms. She sunned herself for a moment, watching him work. Then her mind returned to the sanctuary.

"I came home through the Island of Children. Did I tell you the herons are nesting again?"

"In the Small Wood?"

"Yes. The same place as last year."

He looked over at her with a smile of amused tolerance. Did she think of nothing else but the birds, the legends, Norfolk? She was very young, he thought, much younger than he had been at her age. Fleetinglly the idea crossed his mind that she was missing a great deal in life, living here on the lonely coastal marshes with him. Or was she? Perhaps it was better to remain young and out of the conflict. If she went out from here she would meet new beliefs, new loyalties, new loves. Life would be more complicated and she would lose something in the process. People grow older every time they lose something. Perhaps it was better that she remain young.

His thoughts were abruptly shattered as a shrieking crash of sound startled him to his feet. As he rose he glimpsed Sally, on her feet, waving, and then he saw the jet aircraft. It had passed low overhead and was now climbing steeply away. In front of him, where the grass sloped down towards the beach, gulls had risen

angrily and were squawking their complaints. About the lighthouse too, birds, sun-drowsy a second or two before, were now wheeling about in the purposeless manner of the newly awakened. One bird came planing down to alight on the seat next to Sally.

Sally resumed her seat and looked at the bird. "Poor Perdita," she remarked. "She is always frightened by the jets."

The aircraft was already but a dwindling speck, poised on the top extremity of an almost perpendicular thin white trail. The trail was slowly telescoping out, pushing the speck before it until soon it was completely lost to sight.

Old Circular watched it disappear, and returned to his weeds.

"Sometimes they take no notice of it," he said, referring to the gulls. "Other times, like just now, it really seems to scare them."

"Perdita is always frightened," replied Sally. The bird, a black-headed gull, was completely tame and the only pet at the lighthouse. She perched now on the back of the garden seat not more than a foot away from Sally.

"I don't wonder. It is enough to frighten anyone when a sound like that bursts on you without warning. At least with the old engines you could hear them coming."

Sally was trying to stroke the gull's feathers with one finger, but the bird was not appreciating the attention. "Perdita blames me for the whole thing. She seems to know Bill was in the aircraft," remarked Sally.

"Was he? Then it's a darned fool way to come

calling," growled her father. "Why can't he come in the normal way?"

"Oh, if you want to see more of him, I'll tell him."

He looked up, but she was sunning herself again in all innocence. After a moment he asked, "What is he doing up in that jet? I thought he was ground staff."

"He is. But he is crazy about flying and Squadron Leader Parsons takes him up sometimes."

"He's crazy all right. Anyone is crazy who wants to go rushing about the sky at six hundred miles an hour. What's the point of it?"

She couldn't resist grinning at him as she briefly replied, "Progress."

He grinned in return, appreciating the point. "But why does he want to fly?"

Sally didn't know. "I guess he just likes it," she concluded.

Her father returned to the garden once more with a muttered "Wants his brains tested."

"Dad!"

There was a genuine concern in her voice that caused him to wonder for the first time just how far this friendship between his daughter and the young airman had progressed.

"Oh well," he admitted, "I suppose he's not a bad lad, considering that he's in the Air Force—and he's a Londoner."

"And nothing good ever came from anywhere but Suffolk," she recited.

"That's right!"

Sally rose and picked up the basket of groceries she had brought back from the village. "I thought we'd

have an early lunch.¹ Bill has leave this afternoon and we're going sailing."

"In my boat?"

"That's right," she grinned.

"Then I'd better put that binding on the tiller handle, and then come and have my lunch before I really need it. Corporal Bill mustn't be kept waiting."

"Of course not. Corporals have a way of becoming important people."

He looked up as she walked towards the house, but by the time he had realised what she meant and thought of a suitable reply, she had gone indoors.

The bird, Perdita, flew away from the seat to alight on the windowsill of the kitchen. A moment later Sally pushed up the window and the gull strutted inside with all the authority of a sergeant-major on a parade ground, keen eyes darting here and there for any chance titbits.

[4]

An airfield has a quality that belongs to no other patch of ground. It is a springboard to the sky.

Stand on any Royal Air Force field and you cannot but be aware of the quality about you. You need not see the aircraft or the control tower or the hangars or those wide, rolling concrete carpets. The atmosphere, insistent about you, will be enough to tell you that men have gone skyward from here. There is a restless feeling of expectancy, and a feeling too of insatiable hunger. It has something to do with the piece of sky above you. For you may alter your field, you may develop new

aircraft, you may even journey to other planets, but you cannot leave any trace on that piece of sky. It remains an ever present challenge, unattainable, limitless, and eternal.

The hunger and the expectancy are only part of the quality of the airfield. There is too an awareness of young lives. There are no old men in the Royal Air Force—it is just that some were born before others.

The airfield is restless, never relaxed. Even its silence is like no other silence. It is always tense—a vacuum silence waiting to be filled by a roar of sound. It is never a restful silence. Here the baton is always poised.

It is this special quality that makes all airfields alike. Fallowfield, set in the wide Norfolk marshes, could, but for its surroundings, be anywhere in the British Isles. The general appearance is the same. Control tower dominating the field, hangars, workshops, Armament section, Equipment section, messes, Administrative blocks, barracks. All are of standard pattern as though issued from a giant store marked "Air Force, For the use of."

It is only through familiarity that the personal features of each airfield emerge. At Fallowfield it is the chipped corner where a small bomb bounced off the reinforced Operations Room; the burnt patch on the side of the runway; the way one corner of the Airmen's Mess, built on a rise, sags because five years of air raid trenches caused the land to subside.

Now in the midday sun there was little activity on the airfield as the Meteor jet trainer came in low and sat down to a neat landing. It unwound itself along the

runway and then taxied off round the field to a dispersal point near the road which ran from the Main Gate to the Administrative block. As it came to a halt, comparative silence settled once more across the field, and two men climbed leisurely down from the aircraft.

The pilot ran an appreciative eye over the machine and remarked, "That's a nice job, Bill. Going like a bird now."

The younger man, wearing a Corporal's stripes and without an aircrew brevet, wasn't entirely in agreement with the Squadron Leader. "She's certainly better than she was, sir, but she still seems a bit sluggish to me. Dragged a bit on that last climb, I thought."

"Nonsense. If you want to go banging through the sound barrier you'll have to get yourself something faster than a Meteor."

The Corporal grinned at his Squadron Commander. His delight in speed and his efforts to attain perfection of performance from Squadron Leader Parsons' aircraft were a bond between them.

Bill Morris had only been at Fallowfield for six months, but in that time had formed several strong friendships. That with Buster, who worked with him and who occupied the next bed in the barracks, was understandable even though they were such different types. What was more unusual was the bond between this young ground staff Corporal, aged twenty years, and the Squadron Leader, a well-decorated wartime flyer now in his middle thirties.

Bill had only been on the airfield a week or two before Parsons became aware of ability and keenness in him. But beyond appreciating it, he thought no

more about it. Then one day he happened to ask the Corporal's opinion on a modification that was being carried out, and was surprised at the knowledge informing his reply. After that, gradually, through casual questions, he learned his story.

From his earliest days Bill Morris had only one passion—to fly. All his hobbies and studies were shaped towards his ultimate objective—to be a pilot in the Royal Air Force. With his family and his friends it was an accepted thing that Bill was going to be a pilot. It was inevitable. The first medical examination, however, showed that there was a defect in his colour vision, and he was told that he was unacceptable for aircrew. For a while he was lost. What else was there he could do? What else did he want to do? Flying was the only thing that mattered, and that was out of his reach. Then he rallied and decided that if he couldn't fly, he could at least serve in the Royal Air Force. He applied for entry as ground staff and was accepted.

Squadron Leader Parsons, who had been flying since just before the war, could understand what it must be like to be deprived of flying. He remembered his several periods of rest from flying duties during the war, and the way he had itched to get back to flying. To be permanently cut off from flying would have been unbearable, and he felt a strong sympathy for the younger man. He appreciated, too, the strength in his character that had made him come in on the ground staff and give his enthusiasm to the maintenance side of flying. Thereafter, whenever he was doing a routine testing flight after an overhaul of any of the Meteor trainers, he always invited the Corporal to come along

with him. Bill's one regret was that the squadron Vampires, livelier than the Meteors, were only single-seater aircraft and thus he couldn't get a flight in one.

He thanked the pilot now for the flight, but Parsons only said, "I must be just about the first jet-borne Cupid. I hope your girl friend appreciates the honour."

"She was in front of the lighthouse as we came in," Bill told him. "I'm not sure her father would appreciate the fact, though. I rather gather that the older and slower ways are more to his liking."

"A bunch of flowers and hat in hand, eh?"

"Hardly that, sir. Flowers look a bit silly with a uniform, don't they?"

They were walking away from the aircraft now and approaching the road. A group of airmen came strolling towards them, and past them on a bicycle rode the Flight Sergeant Maintenance. He dismounted and enquired of the Squadron Leader if everything was satisfactory on the test.

Squadron Leader Parsons assured him that it was. "That brings us up to full serviceability, doesn't it?" he added.

A look of gloom settled across the face of Flight Sergeant Campbell. "It did, sir. But this conversion job has upset that. The Group Captain wants to see you, sir. He'll tell you all about it."

Flight Sergeant Campbell stood in gloomy silence as the Squadron Commander hurried away.

One of the group of airmen on the road was Bill's chum, Buster. He left the group and joined Bill.

"Hello. Been joy-riding again?" he asked.

Bill was more interested in the Flight Sergeant's news and asked him about it.

"The whole squadron is to be converted from Interceptor to Ground Attack," he was told. "Three weeks we have to do it in!" The Flight Sergeant glared at them. "Three weeks for a whole ruddy squadron!"

"Just the Vampires?" asked Buster.

Flight Sergeant Campbell looked pityingly at him. "No, oh no. Tiger Moths . . . and Ansons. They're even trying to find an old balloon or two! Heavens protect me from mechanics in napkins," he prayed, and mounting his bicycle he rode off towards the mess.

"What's wrong with him?" demanded Buster.

"You know what he is like," answered Bill. "Every order issued from Group is specially designed to make life more difficult for one Flight Sergeant Campbell."

"But there's no need to pick on me just because I asked him about the Vampires." Then a thought occurred to him and he began to reason it out. "The Meteors are two-seaters. I don't suppose they'd want them for Ground Attack. It must be only the Vampires."

"Right, second time," grinned Bill. "Come on, Buster. I don't want to be late for lunch. I'm going sailing with Sally this afternoon."

[5]

The Group Captain was reading again, with mixed feelings, the signal from Group. The prospect of

conversion to Ground Attack had been in the wind for a couple of weeks, but the latter part of the orders had come as a complete surprise.

The signal was marked "TOP SECRET" and was phrased in the usual brief dictatorial service style.

FROM : 35 Group.

TO : Fallowfield Repeat Air Ministry Repeat
Fighter Command.

(1) 359 Squadron now being fully operational will cease routine flying as from tomorrow.

(2) All Vampire aircraft will be grounded for modification and conversion.

(3) Conversion will be completed in three weeks.

(4) Land is being obtained for Air Firing Range and squadron will carry out intensive ground attack training on completion of conversion.

(5) Maximum efficiency will be attained in four weeks.

(6) Squadron will then proceed on pre-embarkation leave before posting overseas.

A busy two months lay ahead of the station. That didn't worry the Group Captain. It would be a relief to have an urgent task in hand again. What made him restless was the fact that he would not be accompanying the squadron overseas. He, the Station Adjutant, and the Station Headquarters staff, would remain to look after whatever new squadron was posted to Fallowfield. It was a necessary job, and one for which he was well fitted. But it would be good to get abroad again for a tour of service. Particularly if

the squadron was going to a combat area. Korea? Malaya? The Middle East? Kenya? The orders gave no indication of their ultimate destination. Perhaps the engineering modifications would give some clue as to whether the aircraft were bound for cold weather or the tropics.

He rose from his desk and crossed the room to lock the Air Ministry signal in a safe. A knock on the exterior door and Parsons came in with Wing Commander Tony Peel, the Wing Commander Flying. The Group Captain addressed himself to Parsons.

"Tony here already knows about the conversion. But what you don't know is that it has to be completed in three weeks."

"Why the urgency?" It was Parsons who asked the question.

"You're to begin ground attack flying training immediately the conversion is completed."

He went on with other details but made no mention of the fact that the squadron was about to depart overseas. Both the other officers had questions to ask concerning lectures and training films during the period of the conversion. The question arose too of complying with the normal flying stint. Parsons thought that most of the squadron had already done their monthly minimum. If not, the Meteor trainers would have to be used. The Group Captain told them that the engineering modifications were already on their way. Armaments had been advised by signal that their requirements would be dispatched in forty-eight hours. And radio equipment for the new Range Control was already on order.

As Wing Commander Peel remarked, "A whole heap of digits must have been extracted at Air Ministry."

The three officers discussed other problems concerned with the change, and then the Group Captain rose and looked at his watch. "Time for lunch, I guess."

Parsons was still thinking of the conversion. "Why the rush to get the job done in three weeks?" he asked.

"Oh, it's about the normal time for the job." The Group Captain's voice was non-committal.

They strolled to the office door as Peel asked, "Where is the range going to be, sir?"

"Out on the coast, just below Saltingsby. It's some old piece of waste land. We're lucky to find it really. It's the only unused land for miles."

CHAPTER II

[I]

SALLY was waiting for Bill, sitting quietly in the stern of the sailing dinghy pulled up on to the turf near the boatsheds. It was warm now, although further out on the mere away from the shelter a brisk breeze rippled the surface. Bill hadn't seen the boat since she'd repainted it; she congratulated herself that it looked lovely. Graceful yet adventurous. She had painted its twelve feet in clean white, with the gunwales and seats in blue. The simple rigging was in perfect condition and the varnished mast rose jauntily. Her father hadn't been at all keen when she had decided on blue and white, but once he'd seen the finished job he had admitted, "It'll look perfect when you're sailing it." A remark he had refused to enlarge upon.

She had brought some scraps of food with her and was throwing them to the gulls bobbing on the water near her. Beside her Perdita perched on the tiller, regally aloof from this competing for food. A year ago, she thought, Perdita would have joined in the scrimmage. But now she seemed to be completely tame. Almost immediately she qualified the thought for she could never be wholly convinced that the bird was thoroughly domesticated. It often seemed to her that the bird was merely playing a part. She looked at the bird now, perched there watching the other gulls with an uninterested eye. As though sensing the interest in

her, Perdita turned and looked at Sally. There was something in those eyes that she always wanted to know. For centuries these gulls had had their breeding ground in the Island of Children, and the accumulated knowledge of all that time seemed to be in the gull's eyes. It was a look of several thousand years. She had seen the same look once in a photograph of a very old Chinese woman. It was a passive look, and Sally wondered how the look would change if the gulls became aware that their ancient home was now threatened.

What was Bill going to think about the range? She had already decided to show him the sanctuary this afternoon. It was suddenly important to her that he should know about it and understand what it meant to her. She let her thoughts wander on to Bill. She always felt a pleasant anticipation when waiting for him, but this afternoon there was more to it than that. This afternoon was important. Instinctively she felt that there was going to be trouble between the R.A.F. and the village over the target range, and Bill was in the R.A.F. More than that, he loved the service, placed it above all else. What were his feelings going to be in any dispute? She had found herself thinking of this during lunch and at the same time had tried to convince herself that at least his sympathies must be on their side. She asked herself now why it was so important to her that Bill should feel the same way as she did about the sanctuary. She could find no definite answer. It had never before been so tremendously important to her that anyone should share her feelings. She had always been largely self-sufficient. But now, thinking

of Bill, she didn't even want to be sufficient to herself any more. It was now important that Bill should feel the way she felt; in fact his opinion was as important as her own. The idea confused her, and she felt a strange sense of having lost something, a part of her own independence. She groped for an explanation. It wasn't so much a sense of loss as a longing. A longing that had something to do with Bill making up for what she had lost. Out of the confused jumble of ideas there emerged one pivot, Bill. She felt almost shy of herself as she realised this, and was immediately taken up by a swift excitement that he would be here in a few minutes. She looked up and heard his whistle as he hastened through the reedy path towards her. At once all thoughts of the Island of Children fled.

Bill caught sight of her sitting in the dinghy and waved. She came to meet him and he was aware at once of a difference in her.

"What is it?" he asked.

She stopped. "What is what?"

"You look as though you've just found something, or heard exciting news."

She was confused. Could the thoughts of a few moments ago and the unstated conclusion she had reached be so apparent to others?

"It's just the weather. The afternoon." She sounded unconvincing even to herself. "It's lovely for sailing."

He grinned at her. "Yes, yes it's fine. But I've never known the weather to affect you so much before. You look positively . . ." Could he tell her how she looked? He'd never tried to before, and indeed she did look different. There was almost an excitement about her

today. Words, ordinary words, clichés from a hundred stories, raced through his mind. Springtime . . . corn-fields . . .

"Well? How do I look?" There was a gaiety in her prompting.

This wasn't the usual questioning look that he knew so well. This was personal, exciting. "You look as if you ought to be kissed." Half a minute later he murmured, "You should look like that more often."

"But then we'd never get any sailing done." There was humour behind the close gaze which he found disconcerting. To find her in such a mood, and then to have it dance quickly away—how like Old Circular she was in these quick changes. "Who cares about sailing?" he asked, putting his arms around her again.

"I do." She turned away towards the boat. "You haven't even admired the boat yet."

He glanced at it and then back at her. "It's lovely . . . but you're lovelier. You're both wonderful." He felt the inanity of the remark, but didn't care.

"The boat is slightly larger, though," she teased him.

"But very lovely lines." His gaze wandered from the boat back to her and in the same tone he added, "A very trim figure."

"Are you comparing me with the boat?" she asked.

"Both lovely," he repeated, unabashed.

"The boat has rather a broad beam," Sally pointed out.

"Well . . .?" He grinned at her.

"For that, you can do the work." She took her place

at the tiller while he hoisted the mainsail. Mechanically he performed the task, for he was trying to understand the difference in her. In the few months he had known her she had at all times been a good companion, friendly and straightforward. But there had always been a remoteness about her. She'd been a guide showing him things instead of sharing them with him. It was something to do with the way she was wrapped up in the past, in the legends of Norfolk. She lacked his excitement for the present. Tranquil was a word he might have used. But now this afternoon, for the first time, there was an undefined change. She was aware of the relationship between herself and Bill, and even her humour had a personal edge to it. He was delighted with the change.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Somewhere special. I'll tell you about it when we get there."

"It sounds mysterious. How far is it?"

She looked about her with the quick, embracing glance of the expert. "With the wind coming from the east, about fifty minutes."

The mainsail was set and now with a last strain on the jib halyard, his task was complete. As he took his seat near her she remarked on his quickness. "You're becoming quite a sailor."

"Oh, I've learned several things," he admitted.

"For example?"

"That you can't kiss a girl while you're under way in a small boat."

She tried not to smile as she replied gravely, "That's a very advanced lesson."

He nodded. "And since the journey to this mysterious place will take nearly an hour, then it must follow . . ."

"... as the night the day," she murmured.

"What?"

"Oh, it's just something Bookie always says."

"So he reads Shakespeare, does he?"

She wasn't going to be sidetracked and prompted him. "You were saying?"

"Since you can't kiss a girl in a boat, and since the journey will take some time . . ." He didn't finish the sentence, but leaned forward and kissed her. She was sitting across the boat, but when his mouth met hers she moved forward closer to him in the embrace. The sudden movement swayed the small boat and in a moment they were tumbled off the thwarts. Bill laughed. "You should be ashamed. An experienced sailor like you. Haven't I told you about kissing in small boats?"

They pushed the dinghy gently away from the turf. Slowly at first it moved, for here under the lee of the sandhills there was only the lightest air.

"At least tell me what this place is called," Bill asked her.

"It's known as the Island of Children." The gull, Perdita, had been perching daintily on the gunwale near her, but now, as though the words were a signal, she rose and soared up above the waters.

Bill watched the bird, expecting it to return and follow them, but the gull disappeared away across the marshes.

"Where is she going?" he asked.

Sally's mood changed again as she watched the gull go. Thoughts of the sanctuary and the range returned to her. "She has probably gone on ahead to wait for us." Her voice was troubled and she hesitated a moment before continuing. "You see, it is her home."

"The Island of Children?"

Sally nodded.

"But she lives at the lighthouse," Bill argued.

"No. I mean it's where she was born."

Then the breeze caught them and they went skimming out to the centre of the mere. The waters sparkled under the sunny breeze and they blew along in a lifting, surging silence. Ahead of them the shores narrowed into a channel which ran briefly through reed-fringed banks to the wide expanse of Wadely Broad. The tiny wake closed in behind them as they sailed through the channel, stirring the reeds on either side to no more than the faintest sigh of protest. A grebe paddling aimlessly in the channel, dived and came up astern of them. Then they were passing the old, dead oak tree which marked the entrance to the broad, and the wild, lonely, tree-fringed waters lay ahead of them. Expertly, and in perfect rhythm, they jibed the small craft, swung slightly away from the wind and ran across it, over to where, near the willow trees, the river emptied out down towards distant Yarmouth. No other boat was visible on the broad; the birds alone shared it with them. Sally kept the boat close in to the posts marking the deep channel—posts that nearly always bore some sentinel bird. Now it was a kingfisher, poised alertly one moment, and then in the next gone away in a flash of blue. Off it sped before the

small boat and at its passing, in one wide, restless movement hundreds of coot and wildfowl and gulls surged up and wheeled away to the other end of the broad.

Soon they were at the entrance to the river, and turning into it, hugged the distant bank away from the shelter of the sensuous willows bending to trail in the passing waters. Shortly, the river divided and Sally chose the lesser stream, waters that were unfamiliar to Bill. He couldn't see much, for on both sides the banks rose for several feet before dropping away to the marshlands below the level of the river. But as they journeyed on, the river eased away towards the east and the boat sailed close, almost into the wind, and they both perched on the gunwale ready to counterbalance any sudden gust. He could see better now, although the flat mainsail hid most of the marshes extending endlessly away to the west. But gradually, as though the taut canvas was a screen sliding away to permit him a wider view, the whole flat, desolate, green emptiness came into sight. He experienced a feeling of unreality about it and for a moment wondered if anyone had ever been here before. It all looked so untouched. Ahead, on the weather side, the land ran through to the sandhills—but this, too, it seemed to him had a strange, lonely, neglected quality about it. Or was it something in the quality of the afternoon? He felt vaguely that something was going to happen and that he ought to know what it was. Had he dreamed of this place? Or was this going to be one of those strange I-have-been-here-before moments? He looked round at Sally.

"Drop the main, will you? We'll go in under jib." She spoke quietly, he noticed, as though she too had felt this mysterious quality. He rose to his feet and loosened the halyard, and gently the small mainsail settled on the boom. For a moment he remained standing. Ahead, on both sides, were reeds and water mixing away to undefined marshes. The sun was bright, but seemed older. The breeze was almost gone—hardly enough to shiver the warm reeds. The plaintive bleat of a snipe came from somewhere close at hand—and distantly, as though in agreement, drifted back the cry of a redshank.

He sat beside Sally, who seemed to be letting the boat take its own course between the reeds. They were all around the boat now in rows and clusters, with here and there small patches of open water. The boat glided slowly on, brushing the green-golden stems gently away before it. It was like a reverent entrance through some mystic veil into a strange new world. No, not a new world—an older world. He felt the sadness of great age all about him. It was as though Time, rushing busily about changing everything in the world, had overlooked this place. It was the sadness of the forgotten, like the scrapbook of a person who was a great artist fifty years ago, but cannot realise that the book is now full. It was not peace so much as pathos.

He felt Sally watching him. "It's a different world," he said.

"A much older world," she replied. "So old and untouched. There are countless legends about it."

He looked at her but she seemed not to notice him. She was away, almost in some dream world of her own.

A complete change from the girl of nearly an hour ago, this was the familiar Sally. The dreamer interested more in the ancient past than in the immediate present. At such moments he felt she was very young, and so his voice was gentle. "Sally, it's always the legends and the past with you. Don't you find now and tomorrow just as exciting? They are the times of our world."

She smiled at him, knowing that he couldn't understand yet. "This is different."

They slid slowly on, the reeds now more than waist high about them, but the waters more open.

"Let the jib sheet go." Her voice was quiet again. He did as she asked and their progress almost ceased. There was a moment of almost absolute silence before far away from behind the sandhills came a sound of the afternoon sea stirring itself to make a single flat slap at the beach. Then the quietness returned.

"I love it here," she said simply. He looked about him. The world was small and primitive and only the natural elements could be seen. Plant and water and sky. He felt that he could put out his arm and touch the edges of it.

"It's as though Time had stopped," he admitted. "I imagine that if two people had been here a couple of thousand years ago, they'd have seen and heard just what we are seeing today."

"Listen. . . ."

From far away on the marshes came a sound he didn't know. A distant, small, booming sound that seemed to echo eerily inside itself. He looked questioningly at Sally.

"It's a bittern," she told him. "A bird."

"What a ghostly noise."

She nodded and continued to look about her, watching. They were on a wider patch of water and a pair of swans came silently through the reeds, saw them, and moved whitely away again.

"Ghostly," she repeated. She looked at him, not sure how he would take the story she wanted to tell him. "The people in the village, the people who've always lived in Norfolk, say there are spirits here."

"You mean it's haunted?" There was no mockery or amusement in his voice.

"Well, not exactly. Not ghosts. It's more that there are the spirits of children here. Children at peace."

"The Island of Children?" His voice was interested.

She nodded. This was the reason she had brought him here, to tell him about the sanctuary and the proposed range. But once she had told him—what then? Would his pride and enthusiasm for the Air Force override any feelings he might have about the sanctuary? She didn't know. She knew very little about him really. Until today it had never been important. Now she wanted to be certain of him before she tested him. She was troubled how to put it into words and her look showed some of her agitation.

"What is it?" He saw her concern and wanted to help.

"I . . . Bill, I love this place, and . . ." She didn't know how to continue. She couldn't ask him to promise to support them before she told him about the range. No; that wasn't even what she wanted. It was something personal from him she needed. She searched his face, trying to find what she wanted.

Bill held her gaze for a long moment, feeling that she was appealing for something, and hoping that he could know what she wanted. "I love you, Sally." The answer was there and the echo of it died away before he knew that he had found it.

Neither of them moved. It was as though in this small, still world, these were the first words that man had spoken. No other words could matter. The moment ended and Sally smiled. "That makes it so much easier." There was no need to kiss; it was all there in their linking smile.

As though knowing what was expected of him, he pulled in the jib and the boat moved slowly forward again. Sally put the tiller over and in a moment they were through the screen of reeds and out into an open channel of water. A narrow calm channel that ran past the edges of the Island of Children.

The boat bumped gently into the grassy slope and Bill dropped the jib and then went quickly ashore where with one tug he pulled the nose of the boat up on to the bank. He stood looking about him as Sally stepped from the dinghy and joined him. She noticed that they were almost at the place where she had gone down from the bank that morning. From somewhere the gull, Perdita, came down and settled once more on the tiller.

Bill turned to Sally. "But this isn't an island."

"Not now. It was once, though, and we still call it that."

They went down the grassy slope, and at the bottom where it spread away into the marshes, they sat with their backs to the sun and looked across towards the

sandhills. In the Small Wood some jays screamed the news of their arrival and for a moment the whole gossip of birds added their comments. A few gulls flew up from the marshy breeding-ground, and beyond them the restless lapwings rose, wheeled about, and came down again. Soon the sounds died away except to the south where on the crescent-shaped water the harsh voices of the coot protested against a number of teal who had come into their area.

Bill could see the waters quite clearly and exclaimed at the number of birds. "There must be thousands of them. I've never seen so many, not even on Wadely Broad." He continued to look about him, intrigued by the place. "Tell me about it," he asked.

"It's so old," said Sally, "that we don't really know when it began. But the legend of the Island of Children had its beginning nearly two thousand years ago. At that time there were many Roman encampments along this coast. You can still see the ruins of the huge fortresses they built over at Burgh and Caister. And Norwich, too, was a large camp in those days. We think there must have been camps along here as well." She paused for a moment as away on the crescent-shaped water a din of bird voices arose dominated by the numerous coot. A small number of birds rose in protest and flapped away. Crimson head and slow wings were silhouetted against the sky as the teal passed low over them and headed for Wadely Broad.

"In the time of the Romans," continued Sally, "this place was a beautiful, tree-edged, shallow lake. The Romans kept it as a special place for burying their children."

"I didn't know they did that," Bill exclaimed.

"A lot of people don't believe it," Sally admitted. "They think it is just an old wives' tale. But Bookie, who knows more about Norfolk than most people, he says it is true."

"Then it really is an island of children. But what happened to the lake?"

"All these waters about here have been constantly changing. Many of the rivers have altered their courses, broads and meres and lakes have become overgrown. A part of this one gradually silted up and formed an island. Then something happened to make it join up with the land on this side of the lake." She pointed away to the crescent-shaped water. "That's all that is left of the lake now. And over there the Small Wood marks where the northern end of it used to be."

"There is still a swampy-looking patch near the wood. What is that?"

"That's where the black-headed gulls breed. Perdita was born there."

"What has happened to the place since the island formed?"

"Nothing. Nobody would ever touch it because of the bodies of the children. And then, since no one used it, the birds knew they would be safe there and they began to use it for a breeding-ground. It has been a sort of sanctuary now for hundreds and hundreds of years."

"As it was once a burial ground, I suppose the people look upon it as more or less consecrated ground," suggested Bill. "I know I wouldn't care to use it."

"That's not all," Sally continued. "The Norfolk people have always believed that the birds breeding here are the souls of the Roman children. That is why no one will shoot here. Not even Tom Wade, and he's not afraid of anything."

Bill rose to his feet. The legend was fascinating and it fitted in with the strange sensation of mysterious age that he had experienced earlier in the boat. "Children at peace," he said. "Yes, it has that quality too. But there is a sadness about it. Lives begun, but never realised." He turned to Sally. "Think of all the living they missed."

"Think of what they escaped," she replied.

He turned to look at the area again. "Can we go into it?" he asked.

"A little way. Be careful though. It's the nesting season and we don't want to frighten them."

They moved down on to the flat, marshy land and crossed between the Small Wood and the water until they were almost in the centre of the area. There they halted, the wide central corridor open about them.

"Can't you feel it, Bill? Something endless stretching on and on without change. Lives beginning and ending without worry. A repetition of life without danger. A real sanctuary."

They were quite still and silent. Even the sea and the birds seemed to be drowsing in the afternoon sun. Only the reeds rustled their hypnotic hands across the face of Broadland. The moment went on and on.

"Bill." Her voice was quiet. "Did you know the Air Force were looking for a target range?"

"How did you know? We only heard about the

conversion ourselves this morning." Something in her face stopped him. "Sally. Not this place!"

She nodded. "Bill, they mustn't. Not the Island of Children. Anywhere else—but not here."

He looked about him again. It was certainly an ideal place for a range, with no danger to anyone. The mere closed off one end and the wood bounded the other. "They could put the targets here in this open place," he said, "and the Range Control could go down there where the river swings away."

"Bill!" There was almost desperation in her voice. "You can't. You mustn't even think of it. Why, you almost sounded as if you wanted the range here."

She backed away from him and he tried to reason with her. "Sally, I can't do anything about the range. And we'll have to find one somewhere. The trouble is there is so little land left these days."

"There is plenty of land not in use up in Scotland. Why don't they go there?"

"It's too far away," he explained. "The aircraft have only a short range. The target area must be close to the airfield."

"Well, you can't have this land." Her voice was determined.

"Oh, Sally, let's not quarrel about it. If the Air Ministry have taken it, then it is official. Nothing you or I can do will stop them."

"We can stop them. We will. The whole village is determined. You don't know what this place means to us. You're not Norfolk."

She was angry with him now and he tried to pacify her. "I think it is a charming legend, Sally, and I'd

rather not see the place used as a range, but if it is decided . . .”

“They won’t get it,” her voice interrupted him, blazing with certainty. Here was another side of her that he didn’t know. She looked, if possible, even younger when she was angry. She would fight the whole world if she believed in something, he thought. And he felt strangely confident that she would be successful. He almost wanted to smile at her as he agreed. “Perhaps they won’t. Not if everyone in the village is as certain as you are.”

Sally didn’t accept the partial truce in his voice, but regarded him uncertainly.

“I’ve never seen you like this before,” he smiled at her. “So determined and angry.”

Answering his smile, she came forward and kissed him.

“Don’t get angry too often,” he grinned. “You scare me.”

“I’d like to scare the Air Force!”

“They don’t scare very easily—no matter how few they are.” They turned and walked, arm in arm, back to the boat. The gull squawked its welcome and sat calmly while they set the sails.

“What are the village doing about the range?” Bill asked.

“Harry Tilney is going over to your airfield tomorrow . . .”

“To Fallowfield?” he interrupted her.

“Yes. He is going to see your Commanding Officer and explain to him all about the Island of Children.”

As Bill pushed the boat out into the channel.

Perdita rose into the air and Sally watched her winging away across the marshes towards the lighthouse. She felt more certain of herself now. Bill knew about the sanctuary, and somehow the village would find a way to preserve it.

[2]

The Group Captain was intrigued by the tale that Harry Tilney had just told him. When he learned that the village man's mission was to do with the proposed firing range, he had expected opposition of some kind, but not this. It was indeed unfortunate that the land was a sanctuary, but presumably Air Ministry were aware of this fact. It was not up to him to question the wisdom of turning a sanctuary into a firing range. Such matters of policy were settled at a much higher level.

He found Harry Tilney waiting impatiently for an answer to his story. "It is certainly a most interesting legend, Mr. Tilney, and the name of the place is quite charming. But just what do you want me to do?"

"Do? Why, give up the idea of using it as a range, of course." The big boat-builder was indignant that he hadn't recognised this point already.

"I'm afraid that's not up to me."

"But you can't use the land now that you know it is a sanctuary. And there's the children. . . . Why, it's not human!"

"I quite sympathise with your point of view, Mr. Tilney. I wonder whether perhaps Air Ministry were not informed that the area is in fact a sanctuary."

"Maybe not," growled the Norfolk man. "But the

other lot should have known. What do they call themselves? The Ministry for Land Acquisition. I'd like to tell them a thing or two. Blooming Londoners sitting up there in that Whitehall of theirs and taking our rights from us. It's not good enough!" He was beginning to get worked up now and the Commanding Officer stood up to stem the flow of indignation.

"Let's have a look at the map, shall we?" He unrolled a large map of the immediate area and hung it over a map of East Anglia that was on the wall. Fallowfield Airfield was clearly marked and a few miles away across the country the village of Saltingsby was represented. The lighthouse, further south, was shown, but there was nothing to indicate that the area under discussion was a sanctuary, although some miles away at Hickling a part of that broad was shown to be one.

"It isn't marked as a sanctuary," the Air Force man pointed out.

"Can't help that. It has been one for hundreds of years. Isn't there any other land you could use?"

Together they went thoroughly over the map, looking at every sizable piece of land within fifteen miles of the airfield. But every place that Harry Tilney suggested was either heavily farmed or else too close to a community. From the Royal Air Force's point of view the Island of Children was ideal. "I'm afraid there isn't any alternative, you know," concluded the Group Captain at last. "Of course, the choice isn't up to me, but you can see for yourself that there just isn't any other land."

The Norfolk man had been prepared for a dismissal

of his story or some high-handed approach to the problem, but the thoroughness and fairness with which the officer met his objections took the wind from his sails. He saw himself confronted by a huge, just, reasoning machine against which sentiment would be of no avail, and he felt frustrated and angry. "Then you'll have to fire into the sea," he stated.

The Group Captain noticed the change in his voice and wondered at it. "I'm afraid that's no use at all where ground attack is concerned," he stated. "For one thing, you can't observe the results."

Always some get-out, some excuse, thought Harry Tilney. It was no use trying to use reason. "Then if you must have ground you'll have to go to another part of the country where there is plenty to spare."

The Commanding Officer almost smiled at this, in spite of the angry tone. He'd known that sooner or later these words must come. "That's what everyone says," he remarked in a voice quiet with something akin to resignation. "Whenever any of the services want land for defence purposes we always meet with the same cry—'Why our land? Go somewhere else!'"

"Well there is such a thing as the rights of the individual," stated Harry Tilney.

"And there is an idea called patriotism," replied the Air Force man without a trace of rancour. He walked over to the window which looked out across the airfield. This morning there was much bustle and hurrying as the aircraft were being partly stripped so that the first of the modifications could be carried out. For a few seconds he watched the activity and then his thoughts returned to his own last words. "It's strange

how that word comes in and out of fashion," he continued. "During the war it was a wonderful rallying call. People would make almost any sacrifice—land included—and do it willingly in the name of patriotism. But once peace has come in"—he turned away—"patriotism usually goes out the window."

He paused for a moment and Harry Tilney shuffled uncomfortably. He felt that he was being put in the wrong and couldn't understand why. He decided to argue. "That's all very well. During the war we expect to make sacrifices. But one of the reasons we try to win the war is so that we don't have to go on making sacrifices. So where does patriotism come in when the war is over?" He felt he had achieved a point here.

The Group Captain looked at him patiently. This was a point he had discussed so often. The word had been narrowed in its meaning because most people only thought of it in connection with war. "You know, patriotism isn't just sacrificing something at one particular time. It is something that goes on and on in our daily lives . . . not just in wartime. And it isn't sacrificing; it is contributing." Harry Tilney wasn't following these generalities; he could see that. He'd have to put it more simply. For a moment he wondered how he'd been sidetracked on to this issue, but decided to go ahead with it. "It is really very simple," he continued. "Patriotism means seeing that your country is safe and prosperous. And that can only happen when every person does his particular job to the best of his ability. We all contribute something to either the physical or moral needs of the people, whatever our

job is. My job is the Air Force. We have always to be ready in case of a sudden attack on our liberties. I'm only a very small part of that readiness. Those men and those machines out there are the limit of my responsibility. I have to keep them in such a state that they can go into action at the shortest notice. Now we have been told, by someone who has decided it is necessary, that we are to equip ourselves as a ground attack squadron. For that we need a range. Perhaps it is vital for the country's defence. I don't know. . . . Neither do you. But we have to be prepared. . . ." He broke off. He really hadn't meant to give a lecture on the role of the Air Force, but this vexed question of land for the Services was always coming up.

Harry Tilney stood up and joined him at the window. "I'm sorry. You're quite right, of course. But . . ." He made a helpless gesture with his arms. "I can't put things into words like you can. All I know is that in this country we have our rights. We think that land is ours and shouldn't be used as a target range. Someone will have to do something about deciding."

The Group Captain looked at him thoughtfully and then slowly smiled. "I know. It's as simple as that really, isn't it? Someone will have to decide. I'll tell you what. I'll submit a report to Air Ministry right away. I'll tell them all the facts as you have given them to me, and we'll see what happens from there."

"That's fair enough." Harry Tilney was satisfied. Then a thought occurred to him. "Isn't it that other lot, though?"

"The Ministry for Land Acquisition? Yes. But this

is the normal departmental procedure," he smiled. "I submit it to Air Ministry and they contact the other department. We mustn't tread on anyone's toes, you know."

"Seems a long way round of doing things!"

"Don't worry. No one will be allowed to use the range until the matter has been investigated and settled. That shouldn't take more than a few days. The matter is rather urgent."

They walked together from the office into the morning sunshine. Tilney had parked his car some distance from the Station Headquarters, but the Group Captain decided to walk along with him. "I want to know more about this Roman idea of using a lake as a burial place." They strolled off together, Harry Tilney chatting volubly about the many legends associated with this part of Norfolk.

[3]

The Ministry for Land Acquisition occupied a great many rooms in one of the huge blocks of Government offices, of which so many are situated in and about Whitehall. It was a busy department constantly in the public eye over some controversial question of land for purposes of research, defence, or industrial development. The extraordinary thing, thought Miss Flew as she came out of the Minister's office, was that whenever some particularly tricky problem arose, the person most capable of dealing with it was invariably away. This time it was Mr. Jessup who was on leave, and, she

reflected, he would be absent for several weeks this time. Poor Mr. Wentworth was going to be most upset about the whole question of the protest from the village of Saltingsby.

She hurried along the corridor and stopped outside a room marked "Third Assistant Under-Secretary—Mr. Jessup". Several of the papers and circulars she carried were for Mr. Jessup, and since they were only routine matters could await his return. She went in and placed them on his table before continuing along the corridor to the other Third Secretary, Mr. Wentworth. As she came into the room she was struck once again by the contrast between the two offices. After the tidy, impersonal, routine efficiency of Mr. Jessup's room, this office always looked as though it was about to lapse into complete confusion. Somehow, though, it never did. The work was always done, and even the angriest landowner went away from an interview there with the feeling that he had a sympathetic ally in Mr. Wentworth. It was his ineffectual kindness that had first roused her to protect Mr. Wentworth against those in the department who regarded him as a joke. The protection had developed into almost a full-time job now, for, as they also shared one great extra-office interest, bird-watching, many of their evenings were spent together in pursuance of his duties as a member of the Bird-watching Society's Committee. It was because of these duties that she knew he would be upset at having to handle the Saltingsby affair. Now, without a word, she placed the correspondence on his table and went to her desk and resumed her own work.

Mr. Wentworth put his initials to a memorandum,

clipped it to a file, and placed it in his Outward tray. He picked up the document Miss Flew had placed on his desk, read it, and was immediately unhappy.

"This isn't for me, is it?" There was in his voice a desperate hope that some mistake had been made.

"Yes. The Minister has asked for you to handle it."

"But it's really Jessup's pigeon. Can't it wait for his return? How long will he be away?"

"He only went two days ago, Mr. Wentworth, and you know he has twenty-one days' leave this time."

Miserably Wentworth returned to the letter from Air Ministry which stated that the people of Saltingsby had made known an objection to the Commanding Officer at Fallowfield, the Royal Air Force station for whom the range was being obtained. Mr. Wentworth had dealt with similar cases before, but not when a question of bird sanctuaries had been involved. Really, the whole matter was most upsetting. His whole sympathy, as Chairman of this year's Committee of the Bird-watching Society, lay with the Norfolk people. But as an official of the Ministry he could not show any bias towards their cause. His activities in bird-watching were too well known in Whitehall. It really was a most invidious position. He stood up. "I'm afraid I can't handle this, Miss Flew. I shall have to declare my interest in the matter. As Chairman of the Bird-watching Society's Committee I cannot be completely impartial, and therefore must regretfully ask the Minister to have someone else take over the correspondence and deal with Air Ministry in the matter."

Miss Flew waited until he had finished the speech. It was no use interrupting. He'd have finished the

speech, anyway. And they were never long ones. "The Minister knows about your bird-watching activities, Mr. Wentworth, but as the matter is urgent, and as Mr. Jessup is on leave, he wants you to handle it."

Mr. Wentworth sat down. "It really is Jessup's pigeon, you know."

"I'm sure he'll be grateful to you for dealing with it. Especially as he will realise how your personal sympathies were involved." Sometimes she wondered if she was beginning to make speeches too. It was probably the combination of familiar public service phraseology and the manner in which Wentworth spoke, she decided. "The matter is marked as urgent," she reminded him.

"What exactly do they want? We've done the usual routine check, I presume. It should always be done before the public notice is posted."

"The point that is worrying both Air Ministry and our Minister is the question of the sanctuary. They want you . . ."

He interrupted her. "It isn't a sanctuary, you know. I've never heard of the place, but I'm quite sure it can't be one. I know them all in that area. Horsey, Hickling, and the small private one on my brother's place. What were you saying the Minister wanted?"

"All the usual detail. Investigate the title, check with the Nature Conservancy. In fact, go thoroughly over all the ground again."

He returned to another perusal of the correspondence file. "It really is Jessup's pigeon," he muttered. "It is most annoying of him to take leave at a time like this. Really, people are so thoughtless."

"If it isn't a sanctuary, Mr. Wentworth, then your interest in the Bird-watching Society isn't really involved."

He hadn't thought of that. Now he positively beamed at her. "Of course, that does make a difference. Not that I'd like to see the place used as a range. It sounds delightful. Quite delightful. In fact, we might even . . ." He broke off, for a rebellious idea had come into his head. Hastily he put it aside and made a note of the name of the person whom he would have to contact at Air Ministry. There would be time enough to consider the other idea if this appeal by the people of Saltingsby failed.

CHAPTER III

[I]

SOMETIMES early in the year, before the rest of England has thought of summer, the East Anglian skies wear their hottest blue and beam down all day in glorious warmth. This is what we would do for you, they seem to say. Throw away your clouded, hilly skies, dismiss your dull, industrial skies, give us a chance and we will bring you summer. We'll show you blues, hard and clear and bright, blues higher than any you have seen. It is a young sky, exuberant and vital. Maybe it shouts its joy too loudly. Older people are jealous of youth, and always after such a day the other skies of England send out their grey hosts and lay siege to the young blue. Thereafter, till summer, the people on the flat land below can only say, "Remember that lovely day in spring!"

It had been such a day as this. At Fallowfield all the aircraft had been wheeled outside and the mechanics worked in unaccustomed day-long warmth. At Saltingsby the old men had sat with delighted faces, like children tasting the pudding mixture while mother answers the telephone. The cheerful thirst of the village people had kept Joe Bates' till ringing its silver thanks. Now the high heat was gone and the sun was slanting in a more gentle warmth. It was a time to pause, a time to be glad, a time to breathe after the first glorious taste, and savour what lay ahead.

The street which runs from the Open Place alongside the store soon ceases its pretensions to dignity and becomes a foot-track winding across the marram-grass and up to the gap in the sandhills. Here stands the concrete fortification built for the last man-made war, and now left as a changing place for bathers. On either side the sandhills reach out unbrokenly. To the south the lighthouse, high on its mound, ends the streaming run of the beach in that direction. Northward it is impossible to say what happens. For more than two miles the beach swings slowly seaward, and then, presumably tiring of its length, twists back to find what is behind it. The answer is not visible to Saltingsby.

It had seemed the day for the first swim of the year ; but even Sally had not wanted more than a quick splash in the still wintry water. Now Bill ran swiftly up the beach and vaulted on to the concrete ramp on which the fortification stood. Two close heaps of clothes and towels lay there. Snatching up his towel, he dried his head before sitting on the edge of the ramp with his legs swinging down towards the sand. Sally was coming up the beach more slowly. A few yards wide of the more hurried footprints, a single trail of leisurely paces were imprinted in the sand. They led from the clothes to the water, and now Sally was treading in them again as she came back towards the sandhills. Bill watched her, absorbed in not missing a single print. Many a time they had walked from the lighthouse along this beach, and always on the return journey Sally would seek out her tracks and retrace them to her home. He had never asked why. It seemed then to be just one of those odd things that humans do from time to time.

Like not walking under ladders. Or going to church only on Sundays. Now he wondered if, for Sally, there was more to it than that. Was it part of her obsession with the past? Even her own brief past of half an hour ago? He felt baffled sometimes by this obsession. It was naïve he felt, though he couldn't think why. She should be growing out of it by now. Then he remembered the new-found flash of spirit of a few days before at the Island of Children, and the awareness of her femininity. Perhaps she was beginning to awake and expand. It might have something to do with the matter of the range. It had taken her outside her past-world for the first time. Perhaps, whatever the result of the dispute, it might serve the purpose of awakening her to the present.

She was no more than a few yards from him now and, sensing his nearness, looked up. There was a look of quizzical tenderness on his face that changed to a slow half-smile as he encountered her gaze. "What is it?" she asked.

He shook his head in negation. "Just you," he answered.

She knew what he meant. "The footsteps? I always do it."

"Hanging on to the past?"

She made no reply, but smiled and came to him. "Can I have my towel, please?" He reached behind him and found it. As she stood on the sands, he was, perched upon the ramp, just above the level of her waist. She turned her back to him. "Dry my back please." Lightly he rubbed her with the towel and then leaned forward and kissed her on the shoulder. She

took the towel from him and turned and kissed him lightly.

The sun was still warm although now a few gay clouds were blowing up from the sea to watch where the sun must soon set. At beach level there was only the faintest movement of air and the sands were still warm with the day's heat. Sally threw her towel flat on the sand and lay on it. "Come on," she said, looking up at him. "There is no hurry to get back." He lay beside her and for a while they were silent.

"That must be the highest sky in the world," said Sally.

They watched it swinging over them. "It's my favourite piece of sky," he told her.

Lazily, without moving, she answered. "I thought you'd prefer the London sky."

"I know this better. It's the only piece I've ever flown in. Really flown. High and fast."

She was silent for a time, wondering at the note in his voice when he spoke of flying. She wanted to understand it. He knew a joy that was unfamiliar to her. A joy that took him away from her. "Tell me about it."

Tell her about it? Had he ever tried to reason it out for himself, he wondered. Not really, he admitted. It was just something that had always been a part of him. He corrected himself. That wasn't quite true. It was something he had always wanted to make a part of himself. That was more correct. It was something for which he was striving; something in which he wanted to participate. But what? How could he explain? He must have been silent for several minutes as his thoughts chased each other around groping for a

thread that might lead to the centre of the pattern. Sally turned her head questioningly towards him and the movement brought his mind back to her question. He shook his head hopelessly. "I can't. I haven't the words to describe it. I don't think anyone has them." He was silent again for a moment before continuing: "I was going to say it is an emotion, but it is even more than that. It is a kind of uplifted feeling." With a gesture of dismissal, he broke off again, aware that he wasn't saying any of the things he wanted to say. "It's no use. Words are too commonplace. Only music, I think, could express the uplift. The emotion that soars inside you. No"—he was impatient with himself—"emotion isn't right. But something soars . . . the way you are thrilled inside by a sweeping sound of music." Restlessly he rolled over on to his elbows, trying to discard the relaxation and force himself to put his thoughts clearly. Somewhere there must be the right word.

Sally's voice came quietly across his thoughts. "My mother used to talk like that about . . ." She knew the word she wanted and was embarrassed by it. "Sometimes on Sundays," she continued, "she used to say that it wasn't the words in chapel that helped you. It was really the music that took you up there." She had avoided the word. The young don't talk of God. There will be time, late at night before we die, for that.

He knew what she had been going to say. Perhaps it was the word he was looking for. "Yes. It is the same thing in a way." He spoke aloud his thoughts. Yes, here was a thread that might lead to the centre of the pattern; perhaps even find an answer. His voice was

more positive. "You see, Sally ' . . ." Doubt swept him again. "You won't laugh?" he asked. Youth is so vulnerable. It mustn't be laughed at in its gropings.

"No. I won't laugh."

He twisted around on an elbow. He must talk directly to her now. It would help. "Well, man began as something small. Very small. Something that came out of the oceans. He had to learn to master the land and to walk erect. Then there were the seas to sail. Now it's the air. That's the next step. All the time man is changing, growing in . . . dignity, I think, is the word. But whatever it is, he is all the time getting nearer and nearer to something."

She wasn't quite able to understand him or follow these generalities. But his voice carried such conviction that she believed him. "What is he getting nearer?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I don't know. That's what is so hard to explain. It is something gloriously mysterious. But there is an answer somewhere and man must find it eventually. Up there is one step closer to it. Perhaps it is even the final answer. And sometimes when you are flying, flying really high, and you are alone . . . you feel you are no part of the earth any more. You could almost put out your hand and touch . . . I don't know what. But I feel that with just a little more effort, we would be there."

There was a mixture of frustration and near-glory in his voice that almost hurt her. "How can people bear to stop flying, ever, if they feel like that?" she asked. Striving for something without ever knowing what you are seeking, was beyond her understanding.

"Have you ever known a flier—a real flier—who could stop?" He was, he felt, only on the edges of the pattern still. The thread had led him back to his original starting-place. There was only one other set of words he knew that might help her to understand. "I read a poem once," he said after a while. "It was written by a very young airman. I have always remembered the final lines.

" 'And while with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high, untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand and touched the face of God! ' "

He paused a moment and, almost to himself, repeated the last line. "He very nearly expressed it, nearly said something that we feel. It is something important, I can be sure of that without knowing what it is. But it's the reason I want to be up there. Part of it. Close to it. So that I can feel it and see it more clearly."

For a moment there was no word. He wondered what she was thinking. Then she said, quite simply, not meaning anything beyond a statement of the obvious. "I can see it all more clearly lying here on the earth."

Had she understood what he meant, after all? He looked at her, but her face seemed innocent of any depth. Perhaps, quite accidentally, in misunderstanding him she had given the right answer. The answer to herself, and the difference between them. "Yes," he admitted slowly. "Yes, I suppose you see more than I do. But we're different, Sally, you and I. You are a watcher, a dreamer. I am a part of what is happening, a doer."

Her face clouded over as she replied, "I sometimes wonder if there is too much striving and doing. Perhaps if we strove less, we might hurt fewer people."

He realised at once that her mind had gone back to personal problems. "The sanctuary?" he asked. "Yes. I suppose it all boils down to that."

They were silent again for a long moment. "Doers and dreamers," he repeated, rolling over on one elbow and looking down at her. "We—the Air Force—we're the doers. Progress I suppose. And you . . . ?"

She looked straight into his face against the sky. All this rushing and striving for mere ideas. Didn't men know that only people really matter? Her smile was tender as the smile with which one answers a child's funny questions. "Me?" she continued his query. "I love you."

There was no more talk for long moments after that. When, finally, he drew away to look at her, he made himself say, "I think we had better go home." Sally lay still, looking at him, a discontented feeling stirring about the flatness of her thighs. Something of the sensation must have communicated itself to her eyes, for Bill, opposing his words, moved towards her again. With a sudden, frightened movement she sat up.

They dressed in a wary silence, and then determinedly talking like strangers about general, unimportant things, walked back together to the lighthouse.

[2]

Old Circular stood at the window of the pub looking out across the Open Place. It was cooler this evening, the heat of two days ago now only a pleasant memory. On the seat outside the window two young girls of the village sat idly waiting for their father, whom Old Circular could hear behind him at the bar talking to Joe Bates. Otherwise the village appeared empty. Where did they all disappear to, he wondered. The three old men—how did they pass their evenings now that they no longer fished or shot? And the people in the row of houses beside Mrs. Thompson's store—what were they doing? He opened the window. All was silent but for a faint blare of a radio drifting across from one of the houses. Listening to the radio, he thought; "The Archers" and all the other antidotes to self-boredom. Sitting in over non-existent people's exaggerated troubles instead of being out in this lovely spring evening. A calm night and the flat ocean at their back doors, but they sat over their radios. He shook his head sorrowfully and then quite unexpectedly chuckled at himself. A fine one to be mentally upholding the simple outdoors while he stood in a pub with a pint of beer in his hand.

He turned back into the bar. Joe Bates was talking to the father of the two girls, and Soapy and Tom Wade were adding their expected and familiar opinions. At the other end of the bar Fanny was in close conversation with Flight Sergeant Campbell, but all the time keeping an eye towards Buster, who was

playing darts with Bill and two of the hands from Harry Tilney's boatyard. Old Circular wondered if anything had happened between his daughter and the young airman. They had been strangely formal the other night when they returned from swimming. Now they seemed to be avoiding each other. Sally was talking with a group of women, but he noticed her glance continually straying to the dart game. Bill looked over and caught one of her glances and Old Circular noticed how at once, for a brief moment, they were almost unaware of the rest of the bar. No, he decided, there had obviously been no quarrel. On the contrary, there appeared to be a new intimacy, so strong that they found it necessary to remain apart when other people were present. He was vaguely troubled by a realisation that there were some duties of his late wife towards their child which he had neglected to assume. Embarrassed by the thought, he moved to join the dart-players.

The game was casual and silent, only Buster contributing an occasional comment to Fanny when he saw her too much engrossed with the Flight Sergeant. Otherwise the bar was drowsy with subdued chatter and slow drinking. Old Circular felt an urge to start an argument or in some other way shake them to life. Everything was so calm here in Saltingsby. He'd had the same feeling in his early days at sea when smooth seas and a monotonous voyage had continued beyond the limits of a restful change. At such times he would long for a sudden gale or incident to stir the ship to activity and give them something against which to pit their skill and determination. He looked around now

for an opportunity, but, anticipating his thoughts, Fate brought Harry Tilney bursting through the doors.

"They aren't going to help us," roared the big boat-builder, waving a letter. "They even say it isn't a bird sanctuary!"

The bar swung around to face him and in the brief silence that greeted his announcement, Mrs. Tilney's voice came from outside the pub. "Don't just stand there. Go on in." Old Circular smiled to note how once again she had unwittingly spoiled one of her husband's theatrical moments. As they came in a clamour of opinions and questions greeted them and Old Circular almost nodded his head in approval of the sudden change. He noticed Bill's immediate reaction was to leave the dart game and go to Sally's side.

"Not a bird sanctuary?" queried Soapy. "That's daft. Everyone knows about the sanctuary."

"Not the Air Force," argued Mrs. Thompson loudly. "They wouldn't know—if it suited them not to know."

Tom Wade automatically corrected her. "'Tisn't the Air Force. It's that other lot."

"It's the Ministry of Land Blooming Acquisition," roared Harry Tilney. "Lot of Londoners sitting up there telling us what to do. How do they know what the land is?"

"It's on the map," pointed out Old Circular.

"What?" Tilney was disconcerted, not expecting an answer to his question.

"It would be marked on the map if it was a sanctuary," the Suffolk man repeated. "Airfields, light-houses, sanctuaries. All that sort of thing is marked."

"Marked or not, we know it's a sanctuary. But they say they're going to turn it into a target range. Here. Read it." He thrust the letter at Old Circular.

"Read it out." The quiet voice came from Sally.

" 'Dear Sir,' " began the Suffolk man. " 'The content of the objection which you made known to the Commanding Officer of Fallowfield Station has been forwarded to us from Air Ministry and the claim has been fully investigated. The Nature Conservancy Board state that the area is not an official sanctuary and point out that there are two such sanctuaries in that area of Norfolk. Although there is no clear title to the land, it is assumed to be Crown land and we have to advise you that we are going ahead with transfer of the land to Air Ministry.' "

He put down the letter and looked around at the troubled Norfolk faces. "Well," he asked, "what are you going to do about it?"

"We'll have to write to somebody. They're not going to get away with this," threatened Harry Tilney.

"Who is there to write to?" Sally didn't see much hope.

"Writing's no use," argued Tom Wade. "We'll have to do something."

"What?"

"I don't know. I haven't had time to think yet. But we'll have to think of something."

"If only Bookie were here," Sally sighed. "He'd know what to do about it. After all, he was the best solicitor in the whole of Norfolk at one time."

"Oh, he's gone off in search of more material. You know—that book he is always talking about writing,"

said Mrs. Thompson. "He didn't say when he would be back, though. Last time he went away he was gone for three weeks."

Old Circular joined Harry Tilney in a drink and realised that the three Air Force men were still with them. A momentary awkwardness settled across the village people and Bill caught a look between Mrs. Thompson and Mrs. Tilney. "I wish, in one way, there was something we could do to help you," he told Old Circular. "But there isn't anything any of us can do. Besides, we will need land somewhere in the next few weeks."

"Why can't they let the rockets off into the sea?" asked Old Circular.

Harry Tilney knew the answer to that, and repeated what the Group Captain had told him a few days before at the airfield. His listeners grudgingly admitted the sense in the arguments, but still didn't see why they should be the ones to suffer by it. There must be other land than the Island of Children. The eel-catcher summed up the feelings of them all. "No good will come of it," he declared. "Nobody has ever shot a thing on that island, and I reckon it'll bring bad luck to them if they try it."

"They're not going to try it." Harry Tilney was angry again. "We're going to stop them."

"How?" asked Old Circular.

There was, for a moment, no reply to that query as they lapsed into a dejected silence. "Bookie will think of something," declared Fanny Bates hopefully.

Old Circular was scornful. "That Norfolk book-worm! Just like you people to rely on what an old

solicitor tells you. No guts, no imagination to think of something for yourselves. You have to rely on legal nonsense. Suffolk spirit is what you need. In Suffolk we wouldn't let them diddle us like this." He saw he was beginning to rile the big boat-builder. "In Suffolk we don't take any notice of London and their laws. We look after ourselves."

"Look after yourselves?" yelled Tilney. "Never was anyone less able to look after themselves. That's why you're called Silly Suffolk."

The Suffolk man was used to this taunt and ignored it. "Yes; we look after ourselves. And if London tries to make us do things their way, why we ups and has a rebellion."

Harry Tilney looked at him uncertainly. Was this another of the Suffolk man's jokes? So often he had become involved in a discussion with him and ended up by arguing against the point which he had begun by defending. It was one of the lighthouse-keeper's favourite tricks, and he suspected that this might be another such one. He decided to say nothing.

Old Circular, however, was quite prepared to carry on a monologue. "Yes; Suffolk has quite a history of rebellion. Why, we've been in every decent rebellion there has been. Old Wat Tyler's and Jack Kett's. Oliver Cromwell's too. That's because we believe in doing things for ourselves. Not like you Norfolk lot, who can only run off to a solicitor!"

Harry Tilney shuffled uneasily and looked around him for support. Cromwell he had heard of, but who were these other two—Kett and Tyler? He suspected they were names Old Circular had made up. Well, he

wasn't going to fall for any more of his jokes. Not Harry Tilney.

In the silence that followed, the door of the private bar opened and Joe Bates at once moved along to greet the two Air Force officers who entered. The Adjutant and Squadron Leader Parsons often dropped in for a couple of drinks during the evening, and most of the village people were known to them by name and occupation. Tonight they were surprised at the quietness. Most evenings there was discussion, violent or otherwise. Occasionally it descended to monosyllabic dart scoring, but never to this complete vacuum silence. Squadron Leader Parsons was moved to remark on it. "What's the trouble, Joe? Has there been a row?"

"Not yet, Mr. Parsons. There's likely to be one, though."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Well, sir, it's that range of yours. They've just had a letter from that Ministry in London telling them the land isn't a sanctuary."

Parsons glanced at his older friend, the Adjutant. The latter nodded. "I knew it would be that. We had a copy of the letter at the airfield this afternoon."

"Seems unfair to me," the publican stated as he moved to get their drinks. "Your usual, gentlemen?"

They nodded. "There couldn't be any other decision," the Adjutant told him. "These legends and local stories are of no account when it comes to a legal decision."

"But the place is a sanctuary," Joe Bates argued.

"Not officially," the Squadron Leader answered.

"It isn't marked on any of the maps," added the

Adjutant. "I've checked them all. The other sanctuaries are shown, such as the one over at Hickling, but this is just a blank."

"Couldn't it be a sanctuary without being marked on a map?"

"Not really. Once it is accredited by the Bird-watching Society or the Nature Conservancy people, then it becomes an official sanctuary and appears as such on all the maps."

Joe Bates showed his disgust at the red tape that bound up a simple fact like keeping a piece of land as a sanctuary. "There's probably lots of places in England that the London people don't know about—sanctuaries and such places, I mean. They've probably been sanctuaries longer than some of these new-fangled official ones. Aren't they on the maps?"

"Not unless they've been accredited by the official bodies."

The publican lapsed into silence, and then slowly an idea began to grow. The letter had said nothing could be done because the area wasn't an official sanctuary. But what if they could have it made official? Wouldn't that stop the Air Force from using it as a range? Excited at the possibilities of this idea, he hurried back to the public bar. Making sure that the officers would not overhear, he leant over the bar and began: "That there letter says the Island of Children isn't an official sanctuary, doesn't it?" There was a ragged agreement to his query, and he continued: "Then, if it was made an official sanctuary, they'd have to help us, wouldn't they?"

"Have it made official!" roared Tilney. "Ask a lot

of blooming Government people to come down and tramp about the place upsetting everyone? Not me!"

Most of them were inclined to agree with him, but Joe Bates managed to quieten them. With another wary glance at the Air Force men, he confided to the group, "There's not only the Government people. There's the Bird-watching Society, too."

Most of them had never heard of the Society, but Sally was enthusiastic. "That's a much better idea!" She turned to Tilney. "Couldn't we write to them and ask for their help?"

Like the rest of the villagers, he was sceptical as to how any London society or committee could be of assistance to them, but Joe Bates repeated what the Air Force officers had told him. Slowly they became convinced that their only hope of saving the land was to have it officially accredited as a national sanctuary. Only Tilney was not wholly enamoured of the idea of enlisting official help. Even he conceded, however, that "If it's to be bird-watchers or rebellion, then it had better be bird-watchers."

Old Circular still scornfully opposed the whole idea. "You won't get any help from Londoners," he told them. "You're just wasting your time. If you want anything done, do it yourself. It's the only way—the Suffolk way."

[3]

Miss Flew's attention was wandering. She had found it was frequently so at recent meetings of the Bird-watching Society's Committee. She knew that she was

an efficient secretary and was highly thought of in her job at the Ministry for Land Acquisition, and she had always taken a pleasure in her thoroughness. But really these Committee meetings were becoming increasingly futile. She gazed about the room as Mrs. Platt's fat voice droned on about the letter to *The Times*. Once, when she had arrived early and been the first to enter the room and found it in semi-darkness, she had received a strong impression that she was going back through the centuries into a vast, subterranean cave. It was a high, dark room with tall show-cases about the walls in which were displayed hundreds of birds. Her gaze wandered to the end of the room where, on top of a twelve-foot high show-case, there perched a huge eagle. For one sudden wild moment she wished that she might be up there and peep down over the eagle's wings at the gathering below. How ridiculous it must look, she thought. A great, deep, dark cavern with hundreds of dead-eyed birds staring glassily at the half-dozen people who, if they could have remained immobile for a moment, might easily have been a part of that bird-brained family. She looked around at them now. Fat, crow-like Mrs. Platt. The new member, a young man with a long, pointed nose who always held his head tilted back, like some bittern silently camouflaged amongst the reeds. The short, wide-hipped Mrs. Jenkins whose sudden walk resembled the after-view of an ornamental duck on a slippery slope. Her eyes travelled on around the table until she caught a glance from Mr. Wentworth, appealing dumbly for help. She forced her mind back to the meeting.

Mrs. Platt was, as usual, holding the floor. "There

is no point in writing to *The Times* at this stage. It took us a long while to get that last letter printed, and then we were absolutely certain of our facts. But do we know anything about this place? Of course we don't. None of us have ever heard of it. We cannot rush in to support every dispute that is brought before us. We have our own standing and reputation to consider. To make a mistake at this juncture, after the valuable publicity we received from the Warwickshire affair, would nullify all our efforts. The dignity we have attained would all go for naught." Her voice droned on and Miss Flew's attention again wandered.

Bird life had always fascinated her from her earliest days. It had been one of her great private interests, and her knowledge on the subject was extensive. She had never, however, even considered joining a society until she had started working for Mr. Wentworth at the Ministry. Now a lot of the pleasure in her pastime had vanished, for she felt that it was essentially a private pursuit, not one to be carried out competitively in large bodies. These people on the Committee, apart from Mr. Wentworth, seemed completely unconcerned with the original aims of the Society. They were almost wholly interested in their own importance. Cluck, cluck, cluck they went, but achieved nothing. Nothing constructive that was. Miss Flew was suddenly irritated and allowed her elbow to slide off the table so that her arm fell flat on her papers, scattering them in all directions. The meeting was startled, but she ignored the effect. "Mr. Wentworth, you have that other matter to attend to after the meeting. Shouldn't we take some decision on this?"

They gazed at her in amazement, but Mr. Wentworth, relieved at the cessation in the verbal flow from Mrs. Platt, quickly agreed with her.

"Quite so, Miss Flew. Quite so. Since the feeling of the meeting is that we are not sure of the facts in this case of the people of Saltingsby against the Air Force, perhaps the first step should be for someone to check the claim put forward about this Island of Children."

He paused to gaze about the meeting. Mrs. Platt settled into her chair and prepared to launch another verbal barrage, but Miss Flew forestalled her. "What do you think, Captain Williams?"

"Yes, yes, I agree with our President. Let us check the facts first of all. An on-the-spot investigation, I should say. Someone to go down there and meet these people. Find out the truth. What?" The meeting murmured their agreements as each one tried to make himself inconspicuous so that his name would not be suggested. Miss Flew looked around at them. How long was it since any of them had been in the field, she wondered? She felt an urge to nominate Mrs. Platt for the task, but that lady counter-attacked even before anyone could nominate her.

"An immediate investigation is the only course," she agreed. "And who better than our President to carry out the task? From what they say in this letter, the village must be quite near Reedsby, where, as we all know, our President's brother, Colonel Wentworth, has a delightful home. I propose then that Mr. Wentworth is best suited for this very worthy task, which may, if the facts are as stated, help to conserve still another facet of our national heritage."

A veritable broadside of relieved assents greeted this proposal, only Mr. Wentworth staggering under the suggestion. "But I mustn't. I really can't." He turned to his secretary. "Miss Flew, I couldn't possibly. Not in view of the department's interest in the matter."

"Mr. Wentworth feels he shouldn't undertake this matter," she explained to the meeting. "The question of this proposed range has already arisen at the Ministry and, unfortunately, Mr. Wentworth has had to handle the objection."

The young bittern-like man was indignant. "You don't mean that you have upheld the Air Force against these people! Well, really . . ." His voice spluttered away to ineffectual inconclusion. Several other members took the same attitude, and poor Mr. Wentworth really felt that at any moment he might be asked to resign. "It really is Jessup's pigeon," he lamented.

"Pigeon?" Even Mrs. Platt was puzzled.

"I mean, my colleague Mr. Jessup always handles these matters. But he is away on leave. It really has nothing to do with me."

"Then there is no reason why you can't go down there," they triumphantly told him. He made further attempts to escape the duty, but united in their own defence the meeting proposed and carried a motion that Mr. Wentworth should visit Saltingsby village at the very earliest opportunity.

[4]

"There seem to be very few birds about." Bill stood at the window of the living quarters of the lighthouse, looking down the grassy slope and across the flatness of the marshes towards the Island of Children.

Sally came up beside him and put an arm on his shoulder as she looked out of the window. "The black-headed gulls are still there," she told him. "And the herons are breeding over in the Small Wood."

"What has happened to all the others? There were thousands about last week, but tonight on the way over I hardly saw one."

"Migrated." Old Circular's voice came from the table at the other side of the room.

"Usually they leave here earlier in the year. I've never known them to be as late as this."

"When did they go?"

"Suddenly, yesterday and early this morning. I was awake just before dawn and I thought there seemed to be thousands in the air. The noise went on and on. I got up and went to the window and there was a long stream of them stretching out over the sea, and away to the north. Over towards the sanctuary you could see them rising from one bit after another, just as though they had a schedule all worked out."

"Like a giant take-off of aircraft," mused Bill. "When will they return?"

"September and October, unless something drives them down earlier. Usually it's September, though."

"It'll be strange seeing the broads without birds on

them," Bill told her. "I haven't seen them empty before. The birds were already here when I arrived in Norfolk last winter."

"They'll be back," she answered. "And there are still the swans and the gulls and . . ."

"There may not be much longer," her father interrupted. "They won't stay if the Island of Children is once used as a range."

The two young people turned away from the window. "We should hear from the Bird-watching Society in the next few days," Sally remarked.

"Bird-watchers! A lot of nonsense." Old Circular was derisive. "What would poor old Perdita think of a whole society being formed just to watch her? The things people get up to nowadays beats me."

As Sally and Bill laughed together, he noticed that the embarrassment of last week was gone entirely.

"Perdita wouldn't be worried by a little thing like that," Sally decided. "She has much greater worries on her mind." She went to another window and opened it. The gull came hovering down from somewhere outside and alighted on the sill. Bill brought the special dish with some titbits that had been saved for her, and they fed the gull. "She is getting tamer every day," Sally remarked. "She wouldn't let anyone but me feed her up till a few weeks ago."

Old Circular was grumbling, "Harry Tilney wants to come over for a game of crib. I'll be glad when Bookie is back. At least he can play something like a respectable game of cards. Harry has no head at all for crib. I'd as soon play with a black-headed gull!"

"Don't be unkind to Perdita," Sally told him.

"Unkind? Me?" He was amazed. "What about young Bill here? It's his outfit that's being unkind to her."

He was surprised at the quickness with which his daughter rushed to defend the young man. "It isn't the Squadron's fault at all. They don't want to use the sanctuary. They just have to take whatever land they are given. It's that Ministry up in London that has to make the decision."

"Mr. Parsons has asked me several times about the legend," Bill added. "Apparently both he and the C.O. are intrigued by the place."

"That won't stop them from using it," retorted the lighthouse-keeper.

"Maybe not. But they don't want to use it. If they are told to do so, they'll have to obey. But that won't mean they'll like it. In a way it is something like the situation in Malaya and Kenya."

"The same as Malaya and Kenya?" Sally was puzzled.

"Yes. The Air Force have to do what they are told in places like that. But some of the chaps don't like doing it. There are a number of individuals in the R.A.F. who think, like a lot of other people in Britain, that resistance movements in any of those countries are really a movement for freedom. Oh, the natives are going the wrong way about it; we all know that. But some chaps don't relish the idea of using fast aircraft and rockets against misguided natives who, at the best, are only equipped with rifles and machine guns."

Old Circular almost exploded. "But they are the Queen's enemies! Nothing but assassins. Murdering

planters and women and children." He forced himself to maintain his temper. "You're talking nonsense, boy."

"No. I'm not. I didn't say that was my opinion. I'm just saying that often in the Services one has to act in direct opposition to one's personal beliefs. You may believe that the colonies should be handed back immediately to the native population, such as in Kenya. But if the British Government decides that the present movement is subversive and must be squashed, then you obey orders and do your job of destroying them as efficiently as possible. But that doesn't mean you like it. It's the same with the sanctuary here. You might think the sanctuary should be allowed to remain. But if you are told to use it as a target range, then you obey orders and do so."

"Then you're no better than a Nazi!"

Bill reddened and looked towards Sally who was becoming worried at what seemed a quarrel blowing up between the young Air Force man and her father. Before Bill could continue however, the older man apologised. "I didn't mean that. But it does seem to me that if you don't believe in a thing, then you shouldn't have to do it."

"It isn't really as simple as that, is it?" Bill was trying to straighten out his own thoughts at the same time. "We don't, any one of us, know all the facts. There are always larger issues behind the immediate incidents we know about. And if, only knowing the briefest facts, we were allowed to take individual decisions, there'd be an awful amount of chaos, wouldn't there? Suppose Mr. Parsons believed that

Kenya should be handed over at once for self-government. And suppose the Squadron was sent out there to deal with Mau-Mau. Do you think he'd be right in refusing to go into action against them?"

"Of course not," Old Circular agreed. "He has got to do what he is told. But isn't he losing a freedom somewhere?"

"Not really," Bill argued. "He has his opinion on what is right and wrong, but when he enters the Service he surrenders part of his conscience to it. You can't be a leader, even of a squadron, unless you can take orders yourself. And he has to take orders about things that affect the part of his conscience he has given over to the Service. They in turn have surrendered it on political matters to the Government, who are a sort of collective conscience for the country. But all the Parsons of the country still add up to the public opinion which can sway the Government."

Old Circular was eyeing the boy with a new interest. Some of his thinking was naïve, but at least he was thinking and reasoning for himself. He'd never known the boy to open up and talk like this before. He decided to test him, but before he could continue Sally asked: "Why all this talk of Kenya? You're not going overseas . . . ?" Her voice trailed away.

The quiet strain was apparent to both men. "Good Lord, no," Bill told her. "It's just a hypothetical case."

She tried to smile her relief, but was so unsuccessful that she had to turn quickly and leave the room. The suddenness of the incident left Bill looking after her with conflicting emotions. Then he felt the older man's

CHAPTER IV

[1]

WORK on the modifications was progressing well. There was no doubt of that, thought the Group Captain as he walked across the grass border and alongside the hangar towards the Squadron Office. The ground staff were working briskly and cheerfully. They seemed to have caught some of the excitement from the pilots. Throughout the squadron there was an expectancy. This urgent task obviously had some object behind it, and the Group Captain smiled at the recollection of some of the rumours he had overheard. It would do the airmen no harm to speculate. It would give them a new interest and a new incentive.

He reached the door of the Squadron Office and went in. The room was in darkness, heavy curtains shutting out the bright morning sun, and the only light came from a sixteen-millimetre projector throwing its white beam on to a screen at the opposite end of the room. The Group Captain paused to watch the film. An aircraft was coming in low over a snow-covered headland and in the fiord below were a number of ships. Now the ships were springing into defensive action and hurling up their bright steel death towards the intruding aircraft. Now the camera in the aircraft recorded the dive as the machine inclined towards a ship on the left flank. Down, down it went and then

suddenly, as though released from the very camera itself, a pair of rockets went speeding away to land with a smack on the ship as the aircraft pulled up and away. There was a movement amongst the pilots seated in the Squadron Office, and in the dim light the Commanding Officer glanced at them. Most of them were too young to have been in the Services when this film was taken. How many of them had any active service to their credit, he wondered. Probably less than a third. His eyes went back to the screen as a new sequence followed the attack on the convoy. He recognised this shot of a blackened and blasted hangar; it must be ten years since he'd first seen the shot. And the Air Force were still using it. He thought that probably the only item which the services did not wish to have brought up to date was the combat shots in their training films. His mind wandered away again to the prospect of action that lay before the squadron. And for a brief moment as he stood in the darkness, which now, through familiarity, had eased into a dim light, he experienced again the old tightening of nerves at the sight of the flak and the rocket salvos bursting on the screen.

"O.K. Let's have some light." As the film ended, Squadron Leader Parsons' voice came from the front of the room.

The Group Captain took a quick look at the faces of the pilots as light flooded into the room. Some of them were grinning, perhaps a trifle self-consciously, at one another: one or two faces were completely non-committal: others, those who had been in the tail end of the shooting war, had obviously not yet returned

mentally to the Squadron Office . . . they were still seven or eight years away in time.

Squadron Leader Parsons noticed for the first time that his Commanding Officer had entered the room, but was motioned to continue with his remarks.

"Those shots confirm what I have just been telling you," he said, standing easily in front of his men, his voice a mixture of authority and familiarity. "Remember that tip about shooting up hangars. A well-placed salvo along the length of the hangar can bring it down on the aircraft inside it. Now, are there any questions arising from that last film?"

Only one query was raised, by an earnest-faced young Flying Officer who wanted to know how he would estimate the speed for deflection when attacking tanks. "I know that with ships you have the bow wave to help you," he remarked, "but what do you do for armoured vehicles?"

Parsons smiled at the earnest youngster. "You just have to acquire your knowledge and judgment through lots and lots of practice," he told him. "You can swot up all the theory, but in the end it is the practical experience that counts. And you can only get that in the air. That's why I want you all to complete your study in the next two weeks. Study till it hurts, because when we do start flying I don't want to waste any more time on revising theory. We've been given very little time for range work, but we are going to become one hundred per cent efficient in that time—that I promise you!"

There were no more questions and so, after a few

more remarks, Parsons dismissed the lecture. They strolled gaily out into the morning sun and the Group Captain stood watching them through the window as Parsons joined him. In the moment of silence the older man thought of the times he had seen just such a group of cheerful young men walk away from a briefing. The straggling way they held together as they strolled—a couple out on one flank, one trailing in thought behind the others, a burst of laughter from the central group (there would be a sergeant pilot in that lot). They don't change much, he thought, in manner or appearance or in their attitude to flying. He brought his mind back to the job in hand.

"How are they shaping, Peter?" he asked.

"Fine, sir. Keen as mustard to get on to the range, though."

They discussed various aspects of the training, and the Group Captain learned that the newest films, including one on the use of the gyroscopic gun-sight, would be available to them in a few days.

"By the time the aircraft are ready I'll have them all buttoned up on the theory—even if we have to sit up all night," Parsons promised him.

The senior officer grinned at him. "That wouldn't make you very popular over in married patch!"

They went out of the office, across the grass on to the perimeter track and strolled along towards the apron where most of the Vampires were drawn up. The Group Captain was taking up one of the Meteors and Parsons accompanied him towards the aircraft. Although men and aircraft were everywhere, the airfield looked strangely empty and seemed to lack the

usual jet whine. The only sounds were of mechanics at work on the Vampires.

"I hope we get the range on time." The Group Captain's voice was serious again. "I don't like any sort of conflict with local authorities or local opinion. But what are we to do? The training is urgent, so we'll just have to carry on until we hear officially."

[2]

It is not always strength of character that makes a leader. Often it is the very weaknesses and oddities in a character that endear the person to his fellow men, and if this is allied to a forceful personality another unsuspecting leader finds himself with a group of followers. So it was in Saltingsby. No one had ever said, "Harry Tilney is our leader," but over the years it had become an accepted fact. It was a natural choice in some ways, although at first sight you might have expected them to choose the ex-solicitor, Bookie. But a person who is used to reasoning out all sides of an argument is often possessed of a cautious personality and such does not appeal to men who by their very work are called upon to display courage, tenacity, and a certain generosity. No, with Harry Tilney there were often contradictory enthusiasms, sudden unreasoning rages, and unrewarding generosityes, but withal there was an excitement within the man. You could depend on him in a fight, physical or semi-legal. And things had a habit of happening to him and around him. Small incidents in themselves, but recounted one after

the other in Joe Bates' bar over half a dozen beers they added up to a flamboyant character. Your Saltingsby man could always cap a visitor's story by one beginning, "Remember the time when Harry Tilney . . ." Or if the visitor was telling of some local trouble with Authority, it would always end with a Saltingsby man declaring, "Harry Tilney wouldn't have let them get away with that." They would never have been so disloyal as to add that at the time of the various incidents most of them had been as mad as a hornet at Tilney. Somehow you forgot that sort of thing after a while. And Harry Tilney never let their interest in him wane, for however little else was happening in the village or however quiet other affairs had become, there was always one of his Red Thursdays to anticipate.

Harry Tilney had served his time in the Navy, and a troublesome, turbulent, red-marked-paybook-time it was. It was typical of him that he should be discharged some months short of his expected period because he had been involved in a freak accident which damaged one of his legs. "You will be compensated," their Lordships told him, and Harry Tilney returned to Saltingsby with dreams of a nice little nest-egg and a regular allowance that would make life more easy.

The day the letter arrived with the first cheque and the information as to how much he would receive each fortnight happened to be a Thursday. A Red Thursday, the first and the reddest of a long line of Red Thursdays. Tilney referred to his pension now as "a paltry, cheese-paring, little old screw of lolly," but the words he used at the moment of discovery and the volume of voice which announced his opinion of their

Lordships was such as to make the mothers of Saltingsby hastily gather their young indoors. Even now the older men of the village spoke in awe of that far-off Thursday and the amounts of liquor that were consumed. In a bender that lasted for several pugnacious, ranting days Harry Tilney consumed every penny of the cheque. Finally he announced that the fortnightly pension was hardly worth accepting. "It'll buy you a couple of good drinks," pointed out one of the men, and thus were born the Red Thursdays, for every other Thursday when his pension arrived Tilney would cash it at Mrs. Thompson's post office and then make straight for the pub and drink away the whole amount. Red Thursday began as a gesture, but gradually it took charge of him and became important. The pension cheque no longer sufficed to supply all the liquor required on these days, but he never ceased drinking just because the pension had been used up. Even if he had felt like abandoning these days, it is doubtful if the village would have allowed him. It was expected of him. It was one of the reasons why he was their leader. And, too, there was a certain prestige about them. To share one of these days with him—a day that might end at any time of the night and in any part of the marshes—was an experience.

Yes, until now Harry Tilney's Red Thursdays had been one of the prize possessions of the village. Now, for the first time, they threatened to be a source of some embarrassment.

It was the morning following the Group Captain's talk. Flight Sergeant Campbell was leaning on his bike in the Open Place talking to Fanny Bates. The

three old men, sitting comfortably on the seat by the church, were discussing the pair.

"Old enough to be her father," said the old man on the left.

"Not quite." The man on the right was delighted to be able to correct him. "He's thirty-six. She's twenty."

"Too old for her, anyway." The old man on the left was annoyed.

"Some women like them older," remarked the other.

The man in the middle decided to change the subject. "That other one is nearer her age," he said.

"The Cockney airman? The one who is always with Bill?" The man on the left searched for his name.

"His name's Buster," volunteered the man on the right.

"'Tisn't his real name. It's only a nickname."

"I know that. But it's what they call him. Nearer to Fanny's age he is, though. Seems to me she likes both of them."

"One a Cockney, and the other from Manchester. Something wrong with the girl," declared the man on the left.

The man on the right found himself almost in agreement. "Aye. Not like Sally, she isn't."

"They're both the same." The first speaker didn't want anyone agreeing with him. "Sally's young man isn't from Norfolk either."

"Neither is Sally. She's half Suffolk."

"She was born in Norfolk."

They were away on one of their interminable arguments. The old man in the middle moved his pipe to the other side of his mouth and pointed across the

Open Place. "There comes Sally now. Wonder what they're all hurrying to the pub for?" But such is the unimportance of haste to old age, that they made no effort to rise and find out for themselves.

"What's all the commotion about?" Campbell asked Fanny, nodding in the direction of the pub.

"I don't know. Must be something doing, though. There's nearly a dozen of them gone into the bar. Unusual for this time of the morning."

The Flight Sergeant's interest in the affairs of the village soon subsided and he returned once more to the object of his visit. "Now what about tomorrow night, Fanny? We've both got our bikes, and if your old man would let you have a couple of hours off I could pick you up at half-past five and . . ."

Mrs. Thompson, hurrying by, called over, "Have you heard? Now we'll get something done. The bird-watchers are coming tomorrow night."

"Bird-watchers?" Campbell looked blank.

Mrs. Thompson giggled. "There, I shouldn't be telling him, should I, Fanny? But never mind. I suppose he's almost one of the family, isn't he?" With a coy giggle at both of them, she hurried away across the sunlit road. .

"What's she talking about?" Campbell was both pleased and embarrassed.

"The Bird-watching Society." Fanny was impatient at his slowness. "I told you we'd written to them. It's something to do with the range."

"Fat lot of bird-watching they'll do when we get cracking," growled the Flight Sergeant. "Now what about tomorrow night?"

"But the bird-watchers are coming . . . and Buster said he'd be over in the evening."

"Bird-watchers and Cockneys! Anyone would think you were a zoo keeper! What you need is someone to make up your mind for you!"

She suddenly flared up at him. "Well, you won't do it. You're too slow for anything. You won't even have speed gears on your bike!" She flounced away, leaving him gaping.

In the bar of Joe Bates' pub the usual gathering was strangely quiet. Only Mrs. Thompson was full as ever of gossip. "That Fanny is becoming a regular flirt," she told Joe Bates. "She's out there now with the Flight Sergeant. Only yesterday it was Buster."

Joe Bates grunted noncommittally.

"What's the name of this cove?" asked Tom Wade.

Sally's voice answered him dejectedly from the end of the room, "Wentworth."

"Wentworth?" Mrs. Thompson was quick to clutch at the new name. "Who is he? Not the gentleman who's coming from the Bird-watching Society?"

Somebody nodded or muttered an assent and the storekeeper went rushing along a new line of thought. "Wentworth. That name is familiar. There used to be a Colonel Wentworth living over at Reedsby—not at all a nice man as I remember, used to drink rather a lot. . . ." She broke off suddenly. "What is wrong with everyone? You all look so glum."

Sally came over to her father. "Mr. Wentworth is coming tomorrow," she told Mrs. Thompson.

"Yes; I know. What's wrong with that?"

"It's Red Thursday!"

Sally summed up the thoughts in everyone's mind. What would happen when the gentleman from the Bird-watching Society met a drunken Harry Tilney? His letter had been addressed to Tilney, and it was with him the appointment had been made, so there was no use arranging for someone else to keep it. Mr. Wentworth would expect to meet him at six-thirty tomorrow evening, but as everyone in Saltingsby knew, Harry Tilney had never yet been sober at that time on a Red Thursday.

Mrs. Thompson clucked sympathetically at Sally's explanation and relapsed into the general gloom. The short, uneasy silence was broken by a frustrated explosion from one of the men. "How the hell are we going to keep him sober?"

There was no immediate reply to that query, although after a pause one or two tentative suggestions were put forward, including one to the effect that Joe Bates should refuse to serve him. The publican looked startled. "Can't do that—unless he's incapable." Then he added as an after-thought, "He'd probably pull the pub down, anyway."

Even Old Circular's usual jibes were missing from the desultory conversation, for matters were serious. Their first letter to the Ministry had been a failure and now they were depending upon the Bird-watching Society. The Society had been fairly prompt in answering their letter, so it looked as if they were willing to take some sort of action. Why otherwise was a man coming all the way from London to talk to Harry Tilney about the problem?

"What can we do? There must be some way of

controlling him." There was a touch of desperation in Sally's voice.

Tom Wade came out with the only concrete idea. "We could make a sort of Combined Operation of keeping him busy all day," he suggested. "Find all sorts of jobs for him so that he doesn't have a free minute to get a drink."

Knowing Tilney's determination when he had once decided upon a thing, and knowing how decided he was upon his Red Thursday sessions, the village people were inclined to doubt if this would work. But for want of any better idea they were willing to try it. The details were soon settled by Tom Wade, who gave everyone instructions as to what would be required of them.

Leaving the pub, Sally was feeling more confident. "It means so much to us," she told her father, "that it must work."

"I'm surprised these Londoners have been so quick in answering," he admitted. "Now if this silly Norfolk clot doesn't ruin things, we may be able to save the Island of Children yet." He paused halfway along the street that led to the beach. "Shall we go back that way?"

Sally found herself blushing. "I'm going there this afternoon with Bill."

Her father made no comment as they walked on, but wondered at the blush. Sally, too, was wondering. A week ago—was it only a week since they had talked on the beach?—she would have tossed his name off almost as lightly as any other. Now she found a shy intimacy even in the mention of it. A strange elation caught her

up so that without reason she found herself running ahead of her father and then waiting for him breathless at the top of the sandhill.

[3]

The gull, Perdita, was flying lazily, hovering and then swooping along, but always keeping within twenty or thirty yards of the small dinghy as it sailed along the branch river towards the Island of Children. The wind was more fitful today and fluky, sometimes blowing in due east, then dropping away, and returning suddenly from the north-east. Not the best sailing weather, but interesting enough to keep you alert for the sudden changes. Now there was only the lightest air, just enough to keep the boat under way with its tiny boom wide to starboard and the jib trying to butterfly. Sally, sitting amidships with the centre-board raised, was watching Perdita, but a movement from Bill at the tiller drew her attention down to him.

He smiled and with a nod of his head indicated the bird. "We're honoured. She's escorting us today. Last time she went ahead. Remember?"

They watched the gull's lazy flight for a few moments before Bill was prompted to ask her age. Sally told him and explained how the markings changed so that the black head only became apparent in the second winter. Bill wanted to know how long they lived.

"Oh, years and years—maybe twenty. I don't know."

"Then she'll be with you for a long time yet."

"I don't know." A tiny frown wrinkled between her eyes. "Sometimes I have the feeling she won't be here for long."

"You mean she might fly off somewhere?"

"I'm not sure what I mean. She's tame enough, and friendly. But I have an odd feeling sometimes that there is some purpose in her being here. It's as though she is waiting for something to happen . . . expecting it."

Romancing again, thought Bill. From anyone else the words might have sounded nonsense. But there was about Sally a quality, an echo of the lonely marshlands, that gave one the feeling that at any time she might slip away over the border into the half-world of fantasy and find it a real world.

His eyes followed hers up towards the bird. They were unaware of the fresh dark ripples scudding across the waters towards them. The gust hit them, whipping the jib across and veering the boat towards the near bank. Bill trimmed the sails to meet this new breeze and the boat went slap-slapping through the corrugated water towards where the reeds screened the approach to the Island of Children.

Beyond the place where they had landed on their previous visit to the sanctuary, the river swung away to the right and in this corner the marsh shelved out less firmly into the waters. The ground was low and squelchy with reeds almost to shoulder height, and you never knew when you might step from a marshy pathway into several feet of water. Squadron Leader Parsons was discovering this as he carefully made his way towards the river. He had left his Land-Rover just

beyond Saltingsby and taken the track across the marshes to inspect the proposed range. That had been his original purpose, but now it was almost forgotten in the fascination of the place. There weren't as many birds as he'd expected. Some of the more common varieties he had recognised, and he had encountered a swan which, as he skirted a wide patch of water, came at him angrily hissing. Now he stood still for a moment, listening, straining for some sound of the world. But only an old world came to him, blown on a wind that had no freshness but only, it seemed to him, a ghostly agedness. A wind that seemed never quite able to die away and lose the cries of the ancient Norsemen, or the Saxon fisherfolk, or the occupying Romans. What might on the beach, or a few miles away on the airfield, appear to be a light, frolicsome breeze, here was filled with the sighing of Time that could never end. And joining in the lament of the wind the chorus-reeds sighed on for a new tale to tell. Maybe that tale was coming. Not, this time, an invasion of man coming from beyond the sea and sweeping across the ancient marshes, but man coming from the skies, thought Parsons. He roused himself and turned away. No use feeling like that about the place when he had his orders to go ahead with the range construction. But the place did have an atmosphere about it, there was no disputing that. He pushed through the reeds towards the water just as the dinghy nosed in to the clearing ahead of him.

"Hello, Sally. Hello, Bill. Got the afternoon off?" called Parsons.

Bill told him that they had gone as far as possible with the modifications, but were now held up waiting

for equipment. It would be arriving tomorrow morning, and in the meantime they'd been given some time off.

Sally walked ahead of them to the firmer ground. The two men joined her and they stood looking out across the area towards the sandhills. "I didn't see many birds about as I came across here," Parsons told them.

Sally explained that it was the nesting season and he wouldn't see many birds on the marshes, only over on the mere or in the Small Wood. Parsons mentioned the swan and learned that they were always fierce in the breeding seasons, sometimes attacking human beings who came too close to the nest. They were still talking about the bird life when the gull, Perdita, planed in and came to rest a few feet away, where it sat regarding them with a patient look. Bill told Parsons that this was the tame gull he had mentioned to him on various occasions.

"Oh, yes. What did you say its name was?"

"Not an 'it', sir. A she."

"Sorry. What's she called, Sally?"

"Perdita."

The Air Force officer thought this an unusual name and said so. "It's a Latin name," Sally told him. "As she was born here on the Island of Children, I named her after a Roman child." Parsons still wanted to know why she had chosen that particular name and she explained to him. In the days when the Romans occupied this part of Norfolk they had an encampment on a low piece of land bounded on one side by the shallow lake and on the other side by an estuary of the

sea. One night there occurred one of the sudden periodic floodings, but the Roman camp was asleep and unaware of the danger. A child named Perdita woke from her sleep and strayed from her parents. In the darkness she got lost and started to cry. Soon her cries disturbed the camp and roused them from their sleep, just before the water came flooding up to the site. Had they continued to sleep for another half-hour, many of them would probably have been drowned. As it was they were able to save themselves—and all because of the child Perdita.

“And that’s why you called the gull Perdita,” mused Parsons. “You know, in a way I wish history could repeat itself and that your Perdita could save her home here on the Island of Children. I’m afraid, though, that we’re going ahead with the target range.”

With a squawk that sounded like an angry defiance, the gull rose and flew over to the dinghy. Sally turned away to the boat, speaking in soothing tones to the gull.

Parsons looked at the young airman. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

Bill felt a bit sheepish. “It’s a strange thing, sir, but sometimes you’d almost think that bird was human!”

Reincarnation? The legend of the Roman children? Did any of these Norfolk people really believe it, wondered the Squadron Leader. He looked across towards the boat, where Sally was holding the gull on one hand and soothing its feathers gently with the other. That in itself must be unusual, he thought. He’d never heard of these gulls being so tame; usually they were frightened of people.

He took a map of the area from his pocket and unfolded it. "You know the place better than I do, Bill." He pointed to an area between them and the crescent-shaped mere. "What is the ground like over there? All right for the range hut?"

Another angry squawk came from the bird and drew their attention back towards the boat. Sally was standing on her own now, for Perdita had risen into the air and was circling about them. Then with a further angry protest the gull winged away low over the marshes towards the distant lighthouse.

The officer glanced at the young airman, who was obviously not at ease. And the girl didn't seem as friendly as on previous occasions, he thought. He realised he wasn't being very tactful in talking about the range in front of her. "Perhaps you'd better return to your girl friend," he told Bill. "I'll explore the place myself."

They walked over to the boat and Parsons felt he should explain to the girl that it was not his decision to use the area as a range. He was just carrying out orders. Sally was not inclined to think any the better of him because his was not the ultimate decision, and though she said little her attitude showed this. Parsons felt slightly annoyed at this unreasonable attitude.

"You know, much as we sympathise with the village point of view, I think you're all being rather obstinate," he told her. "It won't do you any good. We're going ahead with converting this into a target range."

"You may not be," she told him with a flash of spirit. "We have the Chairman of the Bird-watching

Society coming down tomorrow. They may yet help us to keep the sanctuary."

She turned and stepped into the dinghy. Bill paused for a moment on the river bank, uneasy at the growing difference between the two points of view, and wishing he could say something to ease the situation. Within the next ten days a decision would have to be made, and whichever way it went there would be a strain on certain loyalties. Parsons, suddenly appreciating the boy's worry, motioned him to get into the boat. He stood watching them as they pushed off, their every movement in complete harmony. A finger of sunlight traced its way across the marshes, found the boat and made its blue and white glisten, and then as though pleased with the result decided to stay with the boat. Parsons couldn't restrain a benevolent smile at this happy touch. He found himself calling, "Good luck with the bird-watchers, Sally."

[4]

They still talk in Saltingsby of that far-off Thursday when Harry Tilney received his first pension cheque. But even that famous day, since made more famous by the halo of repetition, has at last been relegated to second place in the line of Red Thursdays. Now, they will tell you in Saltingsby, no misdeed of Tilney's will ever exceed his behaviour on that day when the gentleman from the Bird-watching Society came down from London to see them. It is a fact accepted without argument or reservation that that was Harry's greatest

day. At least that is how it appears to them now in retrospect. At the time they were, as usual, far from amused. Not that it was all Harry's fault. It was nobody's fault really. Tom Wade had done his best and the village co-operated to the last man. But how was anyone to know that one of those awful coincidences, one of those chance meetings, would occur? And, too, just at the crucial moment; just when everything seemed under control.

What surprised everybody was that Harry Tilney never woke up to the fact that his day was being organised. He knew that he was being frustrated in his efforts to get to the pub for a drink. But he didn't know that all the little jobs and matters which needed his attention that day had been specially found and fitted into a schedule by Tom Wade. To Harry it was just one of those annoying days when everybody seemed to want something done. Annoying, that is, in the middle stages of the day. Later it was sheer bad temper. At the beginning it had been a hearty, optimistic sort of day.

Harry Tilney began the day in rare good spirits. Wasn't this the day when the fellow from the Bird-watching Society was coming to see them; the day which would see victory over the R.A.F.? Admittedly, the victory would have been all the sweeter had they been able to achieve it without outside help, but the victory itself was the important thing. He felt so cheerful that it didn't even worry him that the assistance was coming from "a bunch of Londoners". He grinned at the prospect of the R.A.F. having to look for another target range, and continued with his breakfast.

It was then that he remembered that today was pension day. Better take it easy, though, with this chap Wentworth to attend to later. But he did have the devil of a thirst, even at this time of the morning. Well, he'd collect his pension and have just a couple of drinks when they opened the pub. On second thoughts, it might be better to go around the back of the pub and have a couple with Joe Bates before he opened.

Harry's wife had been talking to him for several minutes before he realised the fact. ". . . And then after that we'll have to get the launch ready. They are coming to collect it this afternoon, you know." What was she talking about? He looked at her uncomprehendingly. "Launch? What launch? Who's coming for it?" Patiently she nagged him. "Harry, you haven't been attending to a word I've said." She repeated the story about the necessity for finishing the repairs to the launch, and watched anxiously to see how he would take it. As she reported to Sally later on the 'phone, "I thought he would be bad tempered, but nothing seems to put him out of humour this morning. I've never known him so cheerful. I don't like it. There's going to be trouble."

At the boatyard Harry Tilney worked with more enthusiasm than his men remembered seeing him display in many a year. "Come on, lads; got to get this little job done by ten o'clock." And he set to work, cheerfully singing all the while. His two employees were in the plot to keep him occupied and they were delighted at how easily he was falling for it. But as ten o'clock drew nearer they realised he would be finished with the job quite some time before the next item was

due to come into operation. One of them managed to slip away and get word to Tom Wade, and a few minutes later Harry received a 'phone call. The two men in the shed listened silently as the second phase of the Combined Operation came into play, and for a moment they doubted if it was going to succeed as they heard Tilney arguing. "But I can't do it now, Tom. Well . . . I've got to collect my pension. What? I know Mrs. Thompson will hold it for me, but that's not the point. What? What is the point? Well, I want to see Joe Bates . . . er . . . privately. What? He has gone to Norwich? Oh, all right." He gave up in disgust and consented to do that job about which Tom had asked him.

Once again his annoyance soon evaporated and the people of Saltingsby, whom he passed in the street as he went off to do the task, were thankful to hear his cheerful whistle. It might have proved difficult to manage him, they thought, but actually everything appeared to be going along quite easily. Had they but known it, that was the last whistle they were to hear from Harry Tilney that day. He raced through the job in record time, but just as he was concluding it the Vicar from the next village came along with matters urgently requiring his attention as a member of the Parish Council. And so it went on through the morning. Somehow there was always another urgent matter to be settled at once. His annoyance began to grow, and then something went wrong with the schedule and one of the villagers failed to intercept him as he was finishing a job. Arms swinging, brows now belligerent, Harry strode through the village towards the pub. He

had a thirst greater than any he had known in years. The first pint went down without touching the sides. He ordered another. Fanny Bates, left in charge of the pub while her father was conveniently away in Norwich, wondered if she dared refuse to serve him. It was closing time—but would that make any difference to him? Luckily, Tom Wade had received news of the situation and at that moment he came in with the constable. The latter addressed himself to Fanny. "Told your Dad I'd keep an eye on you today. Can't have him losing his licence through you failing to close on time." Fanny looked at him in undisguised relief. "Just closing now," she managed to gasp.

Tilney's temper grew as the constable stood around talking to Fanny. Would the man never go away? The pub closed and still the constable waited, chatting to Tom Wade and the impatient Tilney. Finally, Harry stamped off across the Open Place and, just at the corner by Mrs. Thompson's shop, encountered Old Circular. The latter greeted him casually, apparently in ignorance of the situation. "Hello, Harry. How are things? Busy?" The big boat-builder muttered a reply and made to pass on, but Old Circular was continuing. "Thought if you had any free time you might like to come over for a game of crib." Tilney dismissed the idea, but then a thought occurred to him. "Have you got anything to drink at the lighthouse?" he asked. "A bottle of rum," replied the Suffolk man. "I only bought it yesterday. Haven't even opened it yet."

That decided Tilney, and he agreed to accompany Old Circular at once. However, the lighthouse-keeper had a few odd jobs to do first and he managed to keep

Harry hanging about for forty minutes before they set off for the lighthouse. He recounted later how much it hurt him to have to smash a full bottle of rum. "But I did it. Took it out of the cupboard and let it drop on the stone floor and smash to pieces. It upset me, I can tell you, but you should have seen Harry. I thought he was going to weep!"

As soon as he could decently do so, Harry Tilney left the liquor-deprived company of Old Circular and hastened away across the marshes. Maybe Soapy, the eel-catcher, would have something to drink at his shed on the river bank. The big boat-builder strode on, his temper rising as his thirst, sharpened by frustration, grew more and more violent. It was hot now and a strong breeze blew across the marshes, down the length of the river. Carried on the wind came a distant hail, and there, away to the left, he saw Soapy waving to him. The eel-catcher was nowhere near his hut, but Tilney changed his direction and hastened towards him. He soon made known what he wanted and could have hugged the little man with joy when he nodded his head in answer to his question. "Of course, Harry. There are a couple of bottles of beer in the hut if they are of any use to you." Tilney muttered a grateful thanks and while Soapy held the small punt, the boat-builder stepped into it. He didn't see that as he was doing so, Soapy deftly removed the oars and pushed the boat away from the bank. When, a moment later, Tilney looked over his shoulder, Soapy was standing on the bank with his back to him and apparently busy with some gear. "Hey, Soapy. Aren't you coming?" he yelled. The eel-catcher turned and feigned surprise

that the boat had moved away, and he called to Tilney to bring it back. By now the boat was drifting before the strong breeze and gently disappearing around the bend of the river. The eel-catcher heard the roar of Tilney's voice complaining that there were no oars in the boat, but decided to make no reply. Soon the angry voice, shouting against the wind, became fainter, and Soapy, with a grin of childlike delight, hastened away towards the village.

Tom Wade greeted his news with great glee. They all knew that with nothing to propel the boat, Harry Tilney couldn't take it up any of the side waters to firm land. He would have to drift on down several miles of open river before he would be free of the treacherous, swampy stretch of reeds and able to go ashore in safety. By the time he had walked back from there it would be time for him to meet Mr. Wentworth from the Bird-watching Society.

The people of Saltingsby had been correct in their estimate of Harry Tilney's plight. At first he had expected Soapy to come after him with the oars. Then when he realised that this was not happening, he began furious efforts to paddle the punt with his hands. The breeze was too strong, however, and all he succeeded in doing was to get himself wedged for a short time between some mud-covered reeds. Thereafter he gave up his efforts and allowed himself to drift down-river, waiting until the present miles of almost bog-land should end and he could go ashore. But his resignation to the inevitability of his situation wasn't a calm acceptance. He was boiling with bad temper, unable to do anything but sit and contemplate his thirst. Never had

he been so dry—and on a Red Thursday! He gave himself up to an orgy of anticipation. He would drink twice as much as he had ever done before. He would get blind, roaring drunk. He'd give them all something to remember. All thoughts of the visit of Mr. Wentworth had long since left him.

When the punt finally reached a place where the river bank was firm, it was late in the afternoon. Harry reckoned that he must be many miles from Saltingsby. He would strike away across the marshes and try to reach the road that runs around the western end of Wadely Broad from Reedsby. The road was little used, but he just might be lucky enough to pick up a lift.

It was hours before he finally reached the road, for the marshes were criss-crossed with dykes, and he had to retrace his steps many times before he could find a way across the incessant channels. And so it was that finally he came staggering along, half walking, half running, exhausted, and angry with frustration, to the place where Fate and Coincidence stepped in in the shape of a car driven by Colonel Wentworth. Not that the Colonel was driving the car now. The car was off the road with one wheel firmly in a ditch and the Colonel was contemplating it with a foolish, but not very happy, smile. The Colonel was drunk. Inevitably, permanently, and purposelessly drunk. It was the normal state for him.

Their meeting was, at first, a great relief to Harry Tilney, until he saw that the car would need pulling out of the ditch before he could get to Saltingsby. In desperation he began heaving and hauling. The

Colonel's comments were all rather pointless and not always tactful. He watched a further gigantic effort by Tilney, an effort that ended in a mighty but unrewarding kick at the recalcitrant vehicle.

"You upset about something?" enquired the Colonel, politely.

"Upset!" roared the Norfolk man. "If you had a thirst like mine and were miles from the nearest pub, maybe you'd be upset!"

This was a matter which the Colonel could not only regard with experienced sympathy, but also assist in a practical manner. He disappeared into the car, to emerge unsteadily, a few minutes later, with a large bottle of rum. "Never travel without liquid refreshment when there are long distances to travel between one point of human comfort and another," he lectured. "Learned that in the desert."

Harry eyed the bottle hungrily as the other man uncorked it and then passed it over to him. His first long swig at the full bottle drew an exclamation of praise even from such a qualified drinker as the Colonel. "You must have been in the desert," he beamed delightedly.

Harry Tilney passed the bottle back to his host, and while the Colonel drank from it, enlightened him that he had been in the Navy. They exchanged names and the bottle was again in Harry Tilney's hands. "Have another drink," the Colonel invited him. "Army and Navy together. Let's drink to that." They had another long drink each and their friendship grew apace. By the time they had finished the bottle, they knew of each other's Service record and each had outlined the

good points and bad points of their own particular branch of the Forces. And then, somehow, the Air Force was mentioned and Harry Tilney remembered the dispute and the fact that he was to meet Mr. Wentworth this evening. He looked at the time. Half-past seven. He was an hour late already. Neither of them were at all steady by now, but by their combined efforts they finally managed to get the car on to the road. This, of course, called for a drink of celebration, and the Colonel produced another bottle from a vast store in the back of the car. Harry felt that another drink or two wouldn't harm him. If this fellow from the Bird-watching Society had been waiting an hour already, then another half-hour wouldn't make much difference. He began, between drinks, to tell the Colonel about his troubles, and blamed it all on "meddling officials from that Whitehall in London". The Colonel agreed with him, drunkenly but wholeheartedly, and confided in return that his brother was just such a meddling official. "Some ridiculous thing called the Ministry for Land Acquisition. Bigwig, my brother. Very big wig. Teetotaller too. Ridiculous fellow. Spends all his time watching birds. Good sober eye, but won't shoot. Bird-watching! That's a fine thing for a man's brother to take up!"

Harry Tilney lowered the bottle of rum from his lips, and stared at the Colonel in disbelief. Wentworth, the Colonel had said his name was. And Wentworth was the name of this fellow who was coming down from the Bird-watching Society. They must be brothers. But the Colonel had said his brother was at the Ministry for Land Acquisition. Could the same fellow be at

the Ministry *and* the Bird-watching Society? Vehemently he began to question the by now befuddled Colonel. The answers were not clear, but at least they left no doubt in Harry Tilney's mind. It was the same man.

Unceremoniously he bundled the Colonel into the car, and after another mighty swallow from the bottle scrambled in behind the wheel. "Spies. Traitors. That's what they are. Disguising themselves as bird-watchers," he muttered angrily as he drove off at great speed, but with little steadiness, towards Saltingsby.

Meanwhile, in the pub there was confusion and no little anxiety. When Harry Tilney had failed to return by six o'clock the people of Saltingsby became alarmed that either something unfortunate had happened to him, or else he had stumbled across a source of liquor. For a while all 'phone lines from the village were busy in an attempt to trace him, but without success. Someone would have to meet Mr. Wentworth, that was obvious. Finally, it was decided that Sally should go.

News of Harry Tilney's disappearance had spread through the village and a great number of people were gathered at the centre of information, the pub. When Bill and Buster came in together just after half-past six they were amazed to find the bar nearly full.

Then Sally returned with Mr. Wentworth. A tee-totaller, he hated the idea of meeting in the pub, but gave way to the suggestion that it was always used for such purposes. His appearance, complete with striped trousers, bowler hat, and umbrella, aroused a great

deal of curiosity amongst the Norfolk people, and the poor fellow began to feel like some freak on exhibition. Then began a long, tedious, embarrassing wait for Harry Tilney. Mr. Wentworth, hopelessly lost without the efficient Miss Flew to guide him, could only protest at the lack of punctuality and keep muttering that "an appointment is an appointment". He was taken around the churchyard by Mrs. Thompson and Mrs. Tilney when he half-heartedly mentioned a passing interest in Norman churches. A mention that he had once prepared a meal of eels brought forth a long lecture from Soapy. Reference to a knowledge of the workings of the Customs and Excise Department caused Joe Bates to deliver a long tirade on the crippling duties on alcohol. Having exhausted these subjects—and the time being now well after eight o'clock—Mr. Wentworth found, in his irritability, a sudden strength and declared that they would have to forget the whole matter if this fellow Tilney didn't arrive soon. For, he announced, his brother was coming to pick him up at half-past eight. So Sally decided it would be better to go ahead without Tilney.

Mr. Wentworth was not used to pubs and had hoped that any discussion might take place in some more private part of the premises. But everyone wanted to hear what he had to say, and he found himself ushered to a table by the window, where he was quickly surrounded by a large group. Ill at ease, he sat stiffly on the bar chair clutching his hat in one hand, his umbrella crooked over his other arm, and the bulging briefcase planted resolutely on his lap. Really this was no way to conduct affairs, he thought. A small select

committee should have been organised. If only Miss Flew were her to arrange things for him. He opened the briefcase, took out the relevant papers and began, pompously because of his nervousness, to address them :

"It seems from all the facts that are available to us . . ." A telephone in the corner of the bar began to ring, and he broke off relieved by the interruption. But he was not to be granted this relief, for Joe Bates muttered to the company at large, "Let it ring," and urged Mr. Wentworth to continue.

"It seems to me," he repeated, "from all the facts that are available . . ." And that was as far as he got, for at that moment the night was shattered by the door flying open as though a tremendous gale had hit it. There in the doorway stood Harry Tilney contriving, somehow, to look almost twice his normal size. The rum had combined with his anger to rouse him to tremendous voice and gesticulation. "Where is he? Where's the spy?" he roared.

It was obvious to all that Harry was well and truly drunk. And, moreover, he was in one of his rare "difficult drunk" moods. A few half-hearted murmurs of appeasement came from the women. Mr. Wentworth half stood up, and then subsided again. Tom Wade and Joe Bates exchanged glances of dismay and prepared for the worst. But Harry ignored all their enquiries as to where he had been, and stood swaying in the doorway, his glare slowly encompassing the whole bar as he searched for Wentworth.

"There he is. That's the spy," he suddenly bellowed, lunging forward across the room towards the startled

little man from the Bird-watching Society. The few people who made attempts to distract his attention were unceremoniously pushed aside. A sudden quietness fell as Tilney reached the table where the meeting had been about to commence. Wentworth had risen and was clutching his umbrella, briefcase, and hat. Harry Tilney stood over him, glaring at him and accusing him. "Mr. Wentworth, I believe?"

"Yes. That is my name."

"Mr. Wentworth from the Ministry for Land Acquisition!" He thumped the table to accentuate the last words, his voice rising to a great roar.

A puzzled, half-angry murmur broke out through the bar. Harry must have gone raving mad. Tom Wade managed to say that the gentleman was from the Bird-watching Society.

"He's from the Ministry," shouted Harry furiously. "A spy. That's what he is. Come down here to rob us and disguised himself as a bird-watcher."

His great roaring anger swept in waves across the poor fellow so that he began to back away in fear. Tilney followed, jabbing him on the chest with a forefinger. "Pretends he wants to help us, but wants to take our land. Can't do it openly so he has to disguise himself."

"There's no question of disguise," gasped Wentworth.

"What?" roared Tilney, grabbing the umbrella from the man's arm. "What's this if it isn't a disguise? No use for these things in this weather. 'Course it's a disguise. And I'll show you what I do with spies."

Several of the men were now really alarmed that

Tilney might do some injury to Wentworth and they attempted to restrain him. But for all the effect it had, they might just as well have not made the effort. For even with three of them hanging on to him, Tilney managed to wave the umbrella on high and snap it across the centre. "There. That's what I do with spies!" The whole bar gasped and in the brief second of near silence only the telephone continued to shrill its message. Then the men closed in on Tilney in a body, but not before he had managed to push his way once again face to face with Wentworth. "That's what I think of meddling officials! Tell them back in that Whitehall that Harry Tilney is more than a match for the lot of them." He brought the broken umbrella down with a mighty gesture so that it caught Wentworth around the shoulders. Half a dozen men pulled him away and Wentworth was left standing at the bar with his broken umbrella draped ludicrously about his neck. Embarrassed and thoroughly frightened, he began to back away towards the door. All the familiar phrases of "furthering this matter by correspondence" came bubbling from him, mingling with the angry shouts of the men holding Tilney, and the concerned voices of the women. Above all bellowed the voice of Tilney, triumphantly announcing his way of dealing with "meddling officials".

Then, to crown Wentworth's shame and embarrassment, Old Circular came in. There was a drunk outside named Wentworth, he announced, who was waiting for his brother to drive him home. Wentworth scuttled away and as the door closed behind him, the wave of sound subsided to an uncomfortable silence.

The irritable voice of Joe Bates came first. "Won't somebody answer that 'phone!"

Buster had been standing all this time at the end of the bar near Fanny, and he moved forward at Joe Bates' question. "I'll look after it, Joe," he grinned. "You attend to the chucking-out business!" He laughed in Fanny's direction, but neither she nor anyone else in the bar were in the mood for his banter. Silently he went to the telephone.

Now that Wentworth was gone, the men relaxed their grip on Harry Tilney, who began to chuckle drunkenly and then shouted for Joe Bates to set up drinks for the whole bar. But nobody wanted to celebrate. Mrs. Tilney chided Harry on his behaviour towards Mr. Wentworth, but he was not disposed to listen to any criticism or scoldings. Hadn't he found out that the fellow was a spy, when everyone else believed he was there to help them? He roared in joyous remembrance of how he had handled the fellow and once again went through the motions of breaking the umbrella. Calling again for the round of drinks, he turned to the gathering, intending to relate once again how he had saved them. But this time it was not the angry looks of his wife or the men that he encountered, but the quiet defeat of Sally. That sobered him. She stood next to Bill, but looked directly at Tilney.

There was a finality in her voice as she told him, "That's the end of the bird-watchers. And they were our only hope of keeping the sanctuary."

Harry could say nothing, an embarrassment slowly seeping through the haze of rum. Sally turned slowly

to Bill. "It's all yours now. The Air Force have won." All in the bar were silent. Was this defeat? The Ministry had turned down their petition. The Bird-watching Society surely would not help them after such treatment. What other course was open to them?

Buster's voice cut across their thoughts. He was still trying to get some sense from the telephone. Now he turned towards the group at the bar. "The call is for Soapy," he announced. This was unprecedented. No one had ever rung up the little eel-catcher before, and this Soapy strongly asserted. He wasn't going to speak on one of those 'phone things. He'd managed without them for over forty years and he wasn't starting to use them now! Buster tried to persuade him, and the others, Tom Wade in particular, joined in, but all to no avail. "I've never used one of them things in my life," repeated Soapy. "And besides, I haven't got my glasses."

Buster appealed to Bill to take over the phone. As Bill recognised the voice, he called delightedly to the crowd at the bar. "It's Bookie!" Then he began listening intently and slowly repeating the message aloud.

A tense silence reigned until he finished, and then an excited buzz spread through the bar. Soapy became the centre of delighted glances.

Bill was still talking on the phone. "What's that? You can't stand in a call-box forever, but trust the people of Saltingsby will act on your information. Yes. All right."

A change had begun to steal over the gathering during the message; now it blossomed suddenly into

an exhilaration of celebration. They stormed the bar calling to Joe and Fanny for drinks, and toasted the success of their newest effort to retain the Island of Children.

They drank a toast to Bookie and another one to Soapy. And since the bird-watchers no longer mattered to them, they drank a toast to Harry Tilney. Tonight was a night for celebration. They toasted everyone—even Colonel Wentworth. The night went on, and somehow nobody noticed that closing time had come and long since passed. And nobody but Old Circular noticed that Sally had disappeared. But as Bill was also absent, the fact didn't surprise him.

CHAPTER V

[1]

THE day following Bookie's message was bright with a golden heat. Spring was no longer just a messenger. The colour and the warmth had arrived now, and the land and the sky flowered. Unlike that earlier day of sunshine, which had possessed a rarer beauty because of its impermanence, the morning following Red Thursday was definite in its statement. The fine weather is here, seemed to be the message throbbing in the even heat, and it is here to stay.

Fallowfield Airfield looked like some naturalist's specimen board, the Vampires spread on the apron about the two hangars resembling giant insects pinned on the concrete frame of the green field. This was the fifteenth day since work had begun on modifying the aircraft, and orders were that they should be completed in twenty-one days. Flight Sergeant Campbell, riding his bicycle, was slowly making a round of the aircraft checking progress on each machine. In the centre of the line of aircraft, but pushed slightly forward beyond the others, was a Vampire on which Bill and Buster were working. They were silent this morning as they worked, their usual bantering chatter absent. The Flight Sergeant noticed this as he approached and stood for a moment watching them make an adjustment before beginning to attach the rocket rail under the starboard wing. Not even the usual animated crack from Buster was forthcoming and

he couldn't help remarking on it. "What's wrong?" he finished up. "Got mumps or some other such childish ailment?"

"Just tired," remarked Buster, and then added meaningly, "I had a late night last night—with Fanny."

Bill had his back to the Flight Sergeant and couldn't resist a grin. Campbell decided to ignore the remark, and asked how the work was progressing, reminding them that the whole job of conversion had to be complete in another six days.

"What's the panic about, Chiefy?" Bill wanted to know. But the N.C.O. was noncommittal. So far as he was concerned, the job had to be done on time so that training could commence. "Although," he admitted, "it isn't giving them much flying training if they are expected to do all the range work in four weeks."

"If they have a range," Bill murmured, and received a sharp kick on the foot from Buster.

"They'll have a range," Campbell said. "I was up at Station Headquarters a few minutes ago. Air Ministry say we are to go right ahead."

"Wasn't there some talk about the bird-watchers coming into the dispute?" Bill queried innocently.

"Not so far as Air Ministry know. No; there is no worry about the range. That is as good as ours. In fact, the first working party are going over there tomorrow to put up the targets and start work on the range huts and communications."

He remained with them for a few minutes longer, examined the rocket rail before they finally locked it, and then went on his way to the next aircraft.

Buster watched him go and muttered after him, "Silly old man. Can't even walk twenty yards without the help of his blooming bike. Why Fanny puts up with him, I can't imagine!"

"Why did you kick me when I asked about the range?" Bill asked Buster.

His chum looked at him sheepishly. "I thought, for a moment, that you were going to say something about Soapy."

"Well, what if I had?"

"He'd probably have wanted to know how we had heard about it. And then, if he started asking questions in the village, he might discover that we had a hand in it."

Bill was troubled. "But all we did was to pass on a 'phone message."

Buster agreed with this, but added, "I think we ought to keep quiet until they find out for themselves." He chuckled. "I'd love to see their faces when they discover!"

Bill was not so sure. Last night when Bookie's message had come through he had felt an instinctive delight in the news it contained. Later, when he was walking back to the lighthouse with Sally, she had remarked on his spontaneous reaction and assumed that his sympathies were with the village people. But were they? The thought worried him.

His face was troubled and Buster realised something of his thoughts. "It's going to upset the villagers if they do lose the place after all this, isn't it, Bill?"

"It'll upset Sally," Bill replied.

Buster wanted to say something to cheer up his

chum, but, embarrassed by any sentiment, he searched for some outside incident. "Hey, Bill, did I tell you that I asked Joe Bates about fixing up his motor launch? He said I can do what I like with it. You know, I reckon that with a bit of fiddling I could get thirty knots out of that old tub."

Bill grinned at him. "You'd never do it, Buster. She won't do above ten flat out. I've seen her."

But Buster wasn't to be discouraged. He was dreaming of racing along the waterways at great speed, Fanny beside him. "If I could once get Fanny out in that boat, she'd never look at old Chiefy Campbell and his bike again," he declared.

At lunchtime he searched out an airman who was a wizard with such engines and went into a long conference with him on the peculiarities of the particular type. So engrossed was he that, for the first time since coming to the station, he missed the current rumour. Bill told him about it during the afternoon. "But everyone has been talking for days about the possibility of going overseas," Buster remarked in reply. Apparently this time there was some basis for the rumour. One of the airmen in the hut had seen some of the new parts arriving for further modifications that were to be carried out later. They wouldn't be incorporated at this stage because they were only fitted when the aircraft were in service in the tropics. "They aren't on the schedule for the present modifications," Bill concluded, "but they have definitely been ordered for our Vampires."

For some time they discussed the possibility of an overseas posting, and the likely destination. Buster

doubted whether, in the event of such a move, he would be taken. He was only in the Air Force for the duration of his National Service. With Bill it was different. He was permanent and would almost certainly go with the unit. Neither of them were certain of their own feelings at this stage. Desire to see foreign places struggled with a reluctance to sever, for however short a time, certain ties and personal attachments. With Bill this last factor was becoming increasingly strong. His thoughts were disturbed by a chuckle from Buster. "Blimey, you can see old Chiefy Campbell in khaki shorts! It'd be worth going just to see that!"

[2]

Squadron Leader Parsons was restless. The trouble was, he kept telling himself, that he didn't have enough to do. And then there was the uncertainty about the future of the Squadron. He was aware that the Group Captain knew what was in store for them, and that, in his own good time, he would pass on the information. Were they going overseas? If so, what would be their destination? He played with the idea for a few moments as he drove the Land-Rover fast along the road that leads from Fallowfield towards the Island of Children, which lies beyond the village of Saltingsby. But after a while he admitted that his restlessness had nothing to do with the future of the Squadron. After fifteen years in the R.A.F., he was accustomed to such uncertainties. No; the trouble was that he had done no flying lately. The thought annoyed

him. He'd imagined that he had got over that feeling, but now it was apparent that he hadn't and probably never would. His mind went back to the war days: 1940 and the Battle of Britain. Every day, many times every day, he had been flying. Then had followed a number of days of forced inactivity; leave, followed by unserviceability, followed by bad weather. He remembered now the terrible aching feeling, the frustration that almost made one weep with helplessness. And then one afternoon, in the pouring rain, he had crossed the airfield and sat in the cockpit of his fighter. The moment he had pulled the hood over him the strain began to ease. Why it was, what had caused it, he never could reason out. But for half an hour he had sat there, enclosed in the familiar cockpit of his fighter, alone in a world of his own controlling, and when he walked back later to the Mess he was calm and able to order a beer and say, "Thank God for the weather! No flying today." He wanted to do that again now and it annoyed him. Annoyed him because the emotional strain of war was a thing of the past, part of memory and experience. Would it always be so? Even on into old age? He gripped the wheel of the Land-Rover and sent it hurtling on down the straight stretch of road that leads between the edge of Wadely Broad and the thin wood that reaches right up to the church in Saltingsby village.

There is no road leading from Saltingsby across the marshes to the Island of Children, and so, at the end of the rough track, he was forced to leave the Land-Rover and make his way on foot.

It was another clear, warm day, warm enough to

cause the earth to send up its lusty smell to mingle with the sea-freshness of the breeze and the springtime perfumes of the plants. Nature was in the full bustle of her creation. Along the dykes, leaves were bursting out on the alder scrub and as he had passed through the wood near Saltingsby he had noticed the change in the chestnuts and the birches. A riot of bird sounds, too, poured forth on every side like the gigantic tuning up of some symphony orchestra awaiting the entrance of summer. It would be early this year, he thought, a summer to remember. He walked on amid the calling of the cuckoos and the restless flight of the lapwings, pausing every now and then by the river bank to watch the diving of the grebes. Somehow, he had no wish to arrive at the range. He forced himself to think of it as a range and not as a sanctuary. And yet he was delaying his arrival simply because it was a sanctuary, and he had no wish this morning to see the work of construction disturbing the ancient area. On such a day as this their intrusion would seem doubly wrong. All about him was a positive process of living. Here was simplicity and the essence of security. Then away across the marshes came the echo of a slow hammering—change knocking at the door of time—and he knew that the working party had begun their task.

When he reached the area of the range and came down from the river bank on to the wide, clear corridor of lifting turf, he saw that an amount of equipment had already arrived. Nearby stood a group of airmen, under an N.C.O., gathered around Flight Lieutenant Edwards, who was to be Range Controller. Parsons joined them and saw from the plan, which Edwards

passed to him, where the Range Control hut would be situated. Away beyond it, about three hundred yards distant, the targets would be erected. The proposed position for the huts was where they now stood; the targets would be near the crescent-shaped water, the Number Two targets being fairly close to the river bank.

The N.C.O. and the airmen went away across the flat marsh towards the distant sandhills, looking for a suitable place, at the extremity of the range, to erect danger flags. The two officers were left together, discussing the suitability of the range. Flight Lieutenant Edwards was of the opinion that the area itself was quite workable, but complained that the equipment would be a bit makeshift.

"The position of the hut and the targets is fine; couldn't be better. If only I had some communications, everything would be bang on. But the C.O. says there isn't a hope of getting the radio equipment inside two weeks. I don't see why we can't wait till it arrives. It'd only mean about a week's delay."

Squadron Leader Parsons had no authority in the matter and merely reiterated that his orders were to begin training as soon as the conversion was complete. "Aren't you putting in a temporary line of some sort?" he enquired.

The Range Controller showed him on the plan what they proposed to do as a substitute until the radio equipment arrived. A temporary line was being rigged across the river, well upstream beyond the range hut, and from there a direct line would go through to Flying Control at Fallowfield Airfield. This arm of the

river would be shut off from public use. It was a side branch which served no properties, and its closing would affect no one. Notices were to be posted at intervals along its length, and other danger signals would be flown on the land approaches. On days when firing was being carried out, a red flag would also be hoisted in Saltingsby village. Then they noticed their Commanding Officer walking across the marshes towards them. They went to meet him.

"Well, how does it strike you?" he greeted Parsons.

"It's fine from my point of view," Parsons told him.

"But Edwards here is worried about communications."

The Group Captain strolled back with Parsons. He nodded in satisfaction at the progress of conversion, and told Parsons that as soon as the Squadron had completed its four weeks flying training on the range, they were to proceed on leave before going overseas. Parsons received the news with delight. Now that it was a certainty and not just a speculation, he realised that it was what he had been hoping would happen. His next thought was of the actual destination, but this the Group Captain didn't yet know. "But," he added, "I imagine you will be getting some opportunity for action." Johnny Parsons felt an itch to get moving immediately. He wanted to start organising, checking, sifting, getting everything ready for the moment. He quickly ran over the points in his mind. Squadron at full strength in pilots. The modifications would be completed on time. The range? He raised the query with the Commanding Officer. The answer was reassuring. "The range is ours. I had the final O.K. just before I left to come over here this morning."

They left the river bank and strolled down towards the place where the targets would be erected. The Group Captain paused to look about him. "It's a lovely place," he admitted. "Not as many birds as I expected, though, and our presence doesn't seem to be worrying them."

Parsons realised that he had been aware of this for some time. He had expected hundreds upon hundreds of birds to be wheeling in protest at the invasion, but apart from an occasional outcry from the crescent-shaped water or a quick sortie by the starlings from the Small Wood, the birds seemed oblivious of their presence. There was very little noise from the working party yet, but in a breeding-ground at this time of the year the very proximity of humans should have been enough to scare the birds. It is almost as though we were here on sufferance, thought Parsons. There's a feeling that the birds are allowing our presence not to frighten them, because they know we will not be here permanently. He dismissed the thought; there had been enough of fanciful thinking this morning. The time for such considerations was past. The Squadron was going overseas and he had a full-time job to get them ready.

A Sergeant came bustling across from the far corner of the range, where it shelved out into the bend of the river. He saluted smartly and addressed himself to the Group Captain.

"Beg pardon, sir. But we've struck a snag."

"A snag?" the Group Captain frowned. "There can't be any snags at this stage. What is it?"

"Well, sir, it's an eel-catcher."

"Eel-catcher?" repeated the officer. "Oh, a bird! I'm afraid we can't halt our work just because of nests in the way, Sergeant. An eel-catcher, eh? Is that the type with the long beak?" He glanced enquiringly at Parsons, who answered worriedly, "It isn't a bird at all, sir."

"Exactly, sir," seconded the Sergeant. "It's a man. A man with a shed."

"A man with a shed?" The Group Captain was more puzzled. "What are you talking about, Sergeant?"

"An eel-catcher, sir. He's squatting on the river bank not far from Number Two target. And it's not a shed exactly, sir. Funny sort of thing, something like a boat, only it has a chimney." He stopped; the whole incident was outside his range of Service experience.

"Squatting on the river bank?" The Group Captain felt he was doing nothing but echo the Sergeant. "What's he doing there? Why haven't you told him to move?"

"Beg pardon, sir, but I did. That's the snag. He says he has every right to be there. He even quoted a long rigmarole to me, stating the authority." The Sergeant paused again, this time in embarrassment.

Soapy, the eel-catcher, had arrived early that morning at the selected position, aided by Harry Tilney and Tom Wade. For some years now he had been living on the water aboard an old boat, with a built-up cabin superimposed on top. The boat had been stripped of its engine to give more living space and had to be towed from one place to another. It was several years since it had been shifted, and the present journey hadn't proved too easy. But with the aid of a powerful

launch, and the help of Harry and Tom, the journey had been made. He had watched the working party arrive more than two hours before. Then, when they were selecting the actual sites for the targets, they had come down near the flat land shelving out into the bed of the river and there they had seen the chimney of his boat jutting above the tall reeds. Soapy hadn't been too comfortable when the first batch of four men arrived and told him to move. But, remembering Bookie's words and the coaching he had received from Tilney, he stuck to his ground and recited the authority. No one had been more amazed than he when this seemed to impress the R.A.F. men. True, they had argued and persuaded, but in the end they had gone away. Soapy was delighted. The first round of the battle had been won and he was happier now that it was over. It was a terrible responsibility, he thought, to have the whole dispute depending on him. He chuckled to himself and set about repairing some of his eel setts. He didn't know how long he might be required to stay here, so he might as well prepare to work. He didn't think this place was much good for his purpose. It was a side water, not nearly as good as his normal position on the main river, but he might as well do something while he was here. He was working at the repairs when the Sergeant returned with the two officers. He recognised Squadron Leader Parsons, whom he had seen many times, and guessed that the other officer was the one commanding the station at Fallowfield. This looked more serious.

The Group Captain was very pleasant and pointed out to him that the land had been acquired by the Air

Ministry as an Air Firing Range. They would, he stated, be using it for air to ground firing practice next week.

"Well now," said Soapy, "you can't fire if I'm here, can you?"

The Group Captain thought he was going to be reasonable. "That's right. That's why we want you to move."

"But I don't want to move. I want to fish here for eels."

"I'm afraid you can't do that. This is Air Ministry property and you're trespassing."

"Oh, no, I'm not," protested Soapy. "I have every right to be here." He almost stood to attention as he recited the words he had used to the Sergeant earlier. "King Henry the Eighth gave to the people of Norfolk the right to take eel from any tidal waters. No power, military or otherwise, can stop the people from exercising that right. As a professional eel-catcher, I am within my rights in carrying out my trade on these waters." He stopped and looked at them triumphantly, amazed that he had got through it all without a mistake.

It was obvious to the two officers that he had been coached and put up to this by someone else. They tried to reason with him. It was important for the air firing training to go ahead. Couldn't he fish for eel somewhere else? Everyone else had agreed to them using the range. Was he going to be difficult and hold them up? But to all their persuasions he turned a deaf ear. He could see by now that he was in a strong position, and it gave him more courage in resisting them. They made one final appeal to his reason, but the only satisfaction

they could get was a dogged "Here I be and here I stay!"

The two officers looked at each other in helpless exasperation. Was this just an idea thought up by some of the villagers to annoy them because of the dispute, or was there some legal right on this strange fellow's side? The Sergeant suggested that if the eel-catcher was a squatter, a trespasser, he could easily get a squad of men and shift him. The Group Captain shook his head. "No, Sergeant. You go back to the working party and tell them to continue erecting the targets and the hut. We will have to check this man's claim."

The Sergeant saluted and went off, much to Soapy's relief. The Group Captain turned to Soapy and informed him that he could stay where he was for the present while his claim was referred to the Ministry for Land Acquisition. He would return to Fallowfield and immediately contact Air Ministry by 'phone. A decision could be expected in a few days. Then they turned and left him.

Soapy watched them follow the clearing through the high reeds, and then disappear from his view into the stillness of the marshes. So they were going to refer it to the Ministry for Land Acquisition, he mused. He hoped that funny little Mr. Wentworth would not have to deal with the matter. After the reception he had received from Harry Tilney, Soapy doubted if he would be very sympathetic to their cause. He returned to his work on the eel setts. But the gossiping reeds seemed for once not to have whispered his doubts across Broadland, for during the rest of the day only

the most contented and happy sounds came from the waters, from the Small Wood, and from the breeding-place of the black-headed gulls.

[3]

Miss Flew walked across Trafalgar Square, a tide of camera-conscious pigeons, flowing away towards a new group of tourists at Nelson's column, brushed across her as she passed. The fine weather had come to London, too, and Miss Flew felt almost gay as she stood on the kerb waiting for the stream of buses and cars to pass. It was a pity to have to go back to the office on such a day, but as the sound of Big Ben's chime echoed along the cliffs of Whitehall she realised that she was already late. But she didn't care. She gave a carefree whirl to the umbrella she was carrying—not her umbrella, but a new one she had just now bought for Mr. Wentworth. He had been quite lost for the past few days without one and had been far too busy to take the time to go along to the shop in Piccadilly to purchase another. And so that, too, had fallen to Miss Flew, taking up part of her lunch hour.

The traffic ebbed away and she continued towards the office. Her heels clicked a gay tattoo as she walked and the whole of her surroundings suddenly amused her. It must be the weather, she thought, that was making her feel this way. Never before had she left the office for lunch without putting on a hat and coat, but today, on an impulse, she had just walked out of the office as she was and felt a glorious freedom in being

able to stroll as she pleased without worrying about her appearance. And no one had looked critically at her. No one had given her a second glance as, hatless and coatless, she roamed along the warm pavements. But in spite of their lack of interest, or because of it, she felt an intimacy about London that she hadn't known before. It occurred to her that if she could wander about her home like this, then why not in a city full of friendly strangers? She realised they were accepting her as she was and not waiting to criticise her; there was no need to defend herself by donning the armour of conventional clothes. I must do this more often, she thought; I'm becoming too conventional. Why should I always wear the same as everyone else in this stuffy place? Yes, stuffy, she repeated. And Mr. Wentworth, too. It was time he stopped being a copy of everyone else. It would do him good to come to work in a comfortable sports jacket, and go to the pub for a couple of pints at five-thirty. She chuckled at the idea and turned in at the Ministry for Land Acquisition.

Her mood lasted even as she went down the dull corridors and into her office. Then it broke forth into laughter as she opened the door and caught sight of Mr. Wentworth. He was holding a memo in obvious disbelief and murmuring incredulously, "Henry the Eighth!"

She didn't know what he was talking about, but it all seemed to fit in with the air of fantasy that had suddenly become apparent to her. She twirled the umbrella several times, much to the amazement of Mr. Wentworth, deftly hung it on the peg where his umbrella had always hung, and then deliberately

removed it again. She took it across the room and firmly laid it on his desk. "I've got your new umbrella," she announced. He didn't acknowledge her at all. He was still staring at the memo as though it were something from another world. "And you need a new suit to go with it." What had made her say that?

"Yes, yes, Miss Flew. I know I do. But what are we going to do about this? This Saltingsby affair has cropped up again. I do wish Jessup would come back. It really is his pigeon."

Lightheartedly she took the memo. An eel-catcher was squatting on the range and claiming some local privilege granted by Henry the Eighth. The idea delighted her and she laughed aloud. The sound disturbed Mr. Wentworth and he tried to remonstrate with her. But it was of no avail; today nothing could be treated seriously. She had a sudden vision, a wild picture of the whole of Air Ministry being held up in their work of defence by some ancient whim of a King dead these four hundred years. How had it happened, she wondered. She imagined Henry the Eighth trying to please a new wife by doing something that would sound grand but really have no significance at all. She could see him looking like Charles Laughton and saying in the thunderously inconsequential manner of Jimmy Edwards, "Anybody who so wishes may take eels from the Norfolk rivers!" Then he had dismissed the idea from his mind. And now the whole of the Air Force was held up because of that idle idea. How very English, she thought. Full of ancient laws and customs which nobody had ever bothered to repeal. She dropped the memo and, with a gay "Good luck to them", went

to her own desk, humming a tune from the latest American musical.

Mr. Wentworth looked at her in pained surprise. "Really, Miss Flew, you're not being very helpful. You might at least take the matter seriously."

She broke off humming to ask, "What do you want me to do? The only thing anyone can do is to check the claims."

Really, she was being difficult. He had never known her like this before. Walking in without a hat and coat, like some little waitress. And putting the umbrella on his desk when she knew it always hung on the peg by the door. Oh, confound things! Confound Jessup! Confound Tilney! Confound Miss Flew! Confound the bird-watchers! The rebellious thought startled him. Hastily he picked up the memo again. Was there any truth in the claim to a fishing right? The matter would have to be investigated by the Treasury Solicitor. He picked up the 'phone and asked for the number. He hoped that, when the call came through, the person at the other end wouldn't be able to hear Miss Flew singing.

[4]

Sally was waiting for Bill, unexpectedly waiting. He had rung her up just before lunch to say that they had completed their job of conversion and been given the rest of the day off. It was a day for being out of doors, and they had said in unison on the telephone, "Let's take the dinghy out," and then laughed because they had both said it together. Laughed in the way two

young people laugh who are happy and can enjoy the smallest incidents that are shared. And now she was waiting for him, lying flat on her back on the warm turf beside the dinghy, the sun beating on her bare legs and arms. Above, the gull, Perdita, wheeled and checked its flight, seeming to hang motionless above her. She moved, and the gull, as though satisfied that all was well, banked prettily away and went sailing down on the light breeze. It was hot today, not with the warmth of springtime, but with the more disturbing heat of summer. She could feel it now, not only on her exposed legs and arms, but thrusting up through her body from the earth beneath her. It clamoured through her, a virile heat, carrying from far below the earth's surface, small echoes of the primitive movements and thrustings of nature. It welled up inside her, this strange beat, this pulse, this rhythm of the earth, and filled her with a longing. Its insistence swept through her demanding an outlet, and she stirred restlessly and suddenly spoke aloud. "Bill," she said, and then wondered why she had said it. She sat up, a newer colour spreading out through the brownness of her face.

Bill and Buster were making their way eagerly towards Saltingsby, laughing and gossiping as they hurried along. Bill was in the highest spirits; he had successfully concluded a good job of work and flying was about to commence again. That and the prospect of meeting Sally, and on such a glorious day as this, combined to make, for him, a world without care. Buster, in the latest American-style coloured shirt, was recounting yet once more just what he had done to

Joe Bates' launch. For the past few evenings he had been working unceasingly on the engine and had only appeared momentarily at the pub. Flight Sergeant Campbell, unaware of what was occupying him, believed that he had ousted the Cockney from Fanny's favour. For several evenings he had her to himself in the bar, but now was Buster's big moment. The alterations to the launch were complete and this afternoon he was going to try it out.

Fanny Bates was waiting for them as they came into the Open Place. She came to meet Buster, and Bill left them and took the path beside the pub, the path that twists damply through the reeds to the place where the village boats are kept.

The village was quiet in the early afternoon sun. A nondescript dog wandered about pretending not to see the ducks swimming just out of reach on the water which laps the lower side of the Open Place. A small child came out of Mrs. Thompson's store and went unwillingly back to its home with the parcel it had been sent to fetch, but cast many a longing glance back at the launch which Fanny and Buster were boarding. The sun shone down on the still village, deprived of the breeze by the sandhills at its back. The three old men, drowsy in their inactivity, sat on in their accustomed places on the seat by the church. They watched without comment as from beyond the out-cropping reeds Sally's small blue-and-white sailing dinghy appeared and went silently away before the breeze that touched the waters out there away from the shelter. Out across the mere it went, the white sailing across the blue, in imitation of the scene above

where small white puffs were gliding across the bowl of the sky. Tiny dabs of white, looking even smaller against the tall sky. Up, up it went in never ending blue, higher than it had ever been before. And wide, wider than this wide land that ran away to the west and the south and the north, trying to meet this majestic beauty. And under this slow ballet sky the sounds of the land came faintly to the deaf ears of the old men. The reed messages were there as always, so insistent that they were now part of silence. The old men didn't hear them any more. And the joyous calls from the thin woods behind them were vaguely heard but deliberately dismissed. They were the sounds of the young and the not yet young. Sounds that cause old ears to ache, and so they are ignored. The old men sat in the sun and thought again of the winters.

Buster was having trouble in getting the launch to start. Fanny had listened patiently to his explanation of what he had done to the engine, and then settled in the front cockpit beside him eagerly anticipating the new turn of speed which Buster promised. Several times he tried to start the motor, but nothing happened. He opened the engine cover and fiddled with the engine, but again without result. Fanny gave up complaining, apart from one final remark to the effect that she should have gone with Flight Sergeant Campbell, and settled drowsily in her seat. The ducks paddled quietly nearby, the reeds waved gently, the village was quiet. Only an occasional tapping from Buster beat gently across the silence. Twenty minutes passed and then Buster was convinced that at last he had found the cause of the trouble. He adjusted it, closed the engine cover,

and resumed his seat beside Fanny in the front cockpit.

"Here we go," he announced. Fanny had heard that too often and didn't stir herself to answer. He switched on the ignition, touched the starter, and there was a shattering roar of sound. With a convulsive leap, the large launch lurched forward across the mere, heading for the bank beside the pub. The ducks scattered in terror as the boat shot through them. Fanny had been thrown into a heap on the cockpit floor, but Buster, half expecting the start, was still at the wheel. He recovered from his shock just in time to swing the steering wheel violently over and save the launch from going aground. Unfortunately, he chose the moment when Fanny, recovered from the initial impact, was collecting herself off the floor. The wild sweeping turn threw her off balance again and she landed smack in Buster's lap. With arms and legs appearing from it in all directions, the launch tore away across the mere, ploughing up a huge white furrow of water, and leaving behind it the angry abuse of the ducks. The old men were enjoying the incident immensely. The first crash of noise had startled them to their feet, and now they stood with delighted grins as the launch disappeared across the mere to the channel at the other end.

Fanny and Buster had sorted themselves out and now both were enjoying the speed of the craft as it raced through the narrow channel, pulling the reeds on either side forward in an angry gesture of protest. Buster was shouting delightedly. "Better than bikes?" he enquired, raising his voice above the sound of the engines. For answer Fanny threw an enthusiastic arm

about him and managed, somehow, in spite of the speed, to kiss him.

In no time at all they were through the channel and heading out into Wadely Broad. Ahead of them a long, low punt was moored across the width of the channel. In it were two men, working with long rakes to clear the sedge from the channel. Now as they heard the launch roaring towards them at unaccustomed speed, they signalled for it to slow down. Fanny caught sight of them and cautioned Buster: "Slow down, Buster. If this wake hits them, it might swamp them." He leaned forward, searching under the ledge to ease the hand throttle. He found it, but it wouldn't shift. He tried again but still there was no movement. He turned and yelled to Fanny, "Throttle's jammed!" She bent forward to assist him, but not even their combined efforts could move it. As they straightened up again they realised, suddenly, that they were almost on top of the punt and heading straight for it. Buster gave a wild tug at the wheel and the launch came around in a skidding turn, missing the punt by a few feet and sending up a great swelling stern wave. The two men in the punt, thoroughly scared, were gesticulating and yelling angrily when the wave hit their punt. For a moment they tried desperately to retain their balance, but then they pitched forward into the large heap of muck they had so recently raked up from the bottom of the muddy channel.

Buster and Fanny were looking back over their shoulders as they saw the two men fall. Buster yelled a desperate apology to them, and Fanny joined in shouting an explanation. They were so busily engaged in

this that neither of them were watching ahead. The boat raced on, once again heading directly for the reedy shore. Fanny, turning forward again, saw what was happening and yelled. Again Buster gave a convulsive tug at the wheel and the boat once more skidded away from danger, narrowly missing the bank, and headed across the broad towards where the river emptied out. Fanny was beginning to feel scared and implored Buster to do something about stopping the boat. Still with one hand on the wheel, he tried pushing, hitting, kicking at the jammed throttle. It was no use; the handle was firmly wedged. They were across the mere by now and charging along the narrow river.

Where the river divides, so that the main branch flows on towards Yarmouth and the lesser stream runs past the Island of Children, Bill and Sally had nosed the sailing dinghy up into the reeds and gone ashore. Beyond it the ground was firm and springy and they turned now to heave the dinghy in so that its bow would be on firmer ground. The roar of Joe Bates' launch came to them, and, surprised that anyone should be travelling at such speed on these waters, they waited to see who it was. Around the bend came the launch, Buster still at the wheel, Fanny thoroughly frightened, and the boat skating in wide, skidding turns around the bends of the narrow, shallow river. Bill and Sally, recognising Buster, shouted to him to decrease speed. Faintly above the roar of the engines came Buster's voice. "She's jammed. I can't stop her!" And then the launch was past, throwing a swirling wash crashing against the small dinghy and causing Perdita to flutter away in surprise. Sally's last glimpse

was of Fanny's terrified face as the launch disappeared around the next bend.

Buster decided that the only thing to do was to switch off the ignition, stop the boat, and then hope that he would be able to free the throttle and start her again. But, somehow, everything had gone wrong, and no matter what he did to the ignition, the boat went charging on. This was really getting serious. He yelled to Fanny that he couldn't even switch off the engine now, and implored her to take the wheel while he climbed aft to raise the engine cover and stop the engine there. But at the present wild speed, Fanny could not be persuaded to even touch the wheel. Buster was getting angry. "I can't steer it and go back to the engine," he yelled. Fanny thought they should make one last combined effort to free the jammed throttle. Buster still had one hand on the wheel, and they both bent forward, below the line of the windscreen, tugging together at the lever. The boat raced forward on its straight course,—but the river turned away to the right. Next moment there was a screaming, skidding, scraping noise and as Buster shot a quick glance upwards he saw reeds passing the boat on both sides. The launch slithered to a halt more than twenty feet up on the marsh, and after a final cough, the engines died away. Fanny collected herself once more from the floor of the cockpit and looked out over the side of the launch. There was land all around her. Her recent fear made her angry now and she turned on Buster, telling him in no uncertain terms just what she thought of him. But he was unabashed. "At least it has stopped the engine," he pointed out, "and nobody is hurt." The

only point he did admit was that the launch was heavy, and would take more than their combined strength to shift it. They tried shoving and pulling, but not one inch did they manage to move it.

"It's no use," Buster decided. "It'll take a working party to move this."

Fanny flared up again. "Then you find the working party. I'm going home." She turned away and began to walk across the marshes. Buster called after her. "But, Fanny, you can't leave me now. Not after the speed I got out of this for you!"

"Oh, can't I?" retorted Fanny. "It's going to take me hours to get home from here, thanks to you. At least I've never had to walk home from a bike-ride!" With this parting shot she marched away through the hot afternoon, leaving a disconsolate Buster gazing in sorrow at the stranded launch.

[5]

They lay on the warm turf in a clear patch fringed with reeds and were silent. The gull, Perdita, perched on the mast and looked the other way. The slow waters gurgled about the stern of the dinghy a few yards away. The sky was high to them now, but narrow, its expanse lessened by the reeds which pushed up close by them. Somewhere beyond the reeds was a breeze, but no breath of it entered this still place. They luxuriated in the sunshine, arms and legs bare, sunning themselves.

"It's hot," drawled Bill's voice as he lay with his

eyes closed against the glare of the sun. "I love it when it's hot."

Sally lay, her arm across her eyes, not two feet away from him. Drowsily she replied after a pause: "I don't. Not really hot. It makes me uneasy."

Uneasy. He turned the word over in his mind. A strange word to use. But typical of her, he thought. Heat was positive, searching, something that shaped things. No; Sally wouldn't like that. Warmth was more the word for her, he thought. The gentle warmth of an English springtime. How like the English spring she was. He saw, in his mind, a gentle flowering country; a quietness and a freshness racked by no extremes; and possessing even in the creative time of its young spring a calm serenity that derived from being part of ancient things. And yet, he thought, his mind switching back to Sally, she was changing. There was a more positive manner about her since the dispute over the range had begun. People who have no chance to participate in the active life of their community are often, subconsciously, aware of the defect, and, subconsciously, they turn away from the present towards the past. Their romantic day dreamings supersede actuality and they remain in the backwater of life. It is only when something rouses them to unite with their fellows that the qualities for service, hidden for years perhaps, are brought into use and through use grow stronger. He wondered if this was happening already with Sally. She was more a member of the village now, more a part of what was happening. And the change was bringing a maturity too. Maturity? When she could look so absurdly young in her shorts

and open neck shirt? He turned so that he could see her lying on her back, her hand across her eyes. He watched her, and wanted to move her hand and see those calm grey eyes and kiss that mouth. The sun beat at his temples, and an ache came up through him and stopped in his throat. He reached an arm towards her, but she spoke, and he paused.

"Bill?" her voice was far away.

He murmured a query, watching her.

"I went into the Island of Children the other night. I was there on my own and I was thinking of what we were talking about on the beach that day."

He relaxed back now, lying on his back again and listening to her. "Flying?" he said. "Yes; I remember."

"Yes; flying," she repeated. "And somehow, all of a sudden, there in the quietness, I saw that perhaps we were really both after the same thing, you and I. It's just that we are going in opposite directions to look for it."

She stopped again, searching for her words. He waited a moment. In the silence he heard her move her arm from her face. She wants encouragement, he thought. He said, "You mean . . . what I said about men getting nearer to something? Something that I think we may find in flying?"

"Yes." Her voice was tentative, still. "I wonder if that's why I'm in love with that other world. Perhaps we are getting further and further away from something that's simple and somehow true. The further we get, the more frantic the searching becomes, the wilder the possibilities we explore. Isn't it possible we might

have to go right back to the beginning again to find what we thought we had lost?"

He had discarded his relaxation now. His mind darted back to his thoughts of a few minutes ago. An awakening to actualities of the present; hadn't he suggested that to himself? What was this then? A questioning of her ideas; an attempt to state what was but vaguely experienced; perhaps even a last defence of the old ideas?

"Sally, do you mean we've wasted thousands of years?"

"Perhaps," she replied. "And if it has all been wrong, then I don't want any more change. Couldn't we just stop for a moment . . . and . . . well, look at ourselves. . . ." Her voice trailed away for a moment, and then resumed in a less certain manner: "I don't know. I can't explain it now. But it was all so clear the other night at the Island of Children."

He knew then. He turned on his side and raised himself on one elbow. Her grey eyes were questioning him. He paused for a moment, the sun beginning to beat at his temples again. He forced his mind on to the discussion. "Sally, we can't stop. That would be against nature—as your Dad would say." He smiled down at her.

She half smiled in reply, but continued: "Bookie says some people used to stop to give themselves time to think. Monks and philosophers and people."

If she could only have known how she looked to him; the serious incongruity of her words, in this place, at this moment, she wouldn't have smiled that smile. It distracted any last trace of concentration. The ache

was in his throat again, but he tried to smile at her. "I don't see you as a monk . . . or a philosopher. . . ." He couldn't continue.

Sally moved her arms and found she was tensing herself, her palms flat on the warm earth. Bill's voice sounded different. "You're laughing at me?" The question in her voice seemed to be asking another question.

He was losing himself in her face, and a voice that sounded like his said, "No ; I'm not. Just smiling."

She held his eyes now. She could feel the pulse of the earth again ; was becoming breathless again. "Why?"

Oh, Sally, he thought, how long are we playing this game of words? "Because I'm happy," the words said.

She stirred, she wanted a release. She heard her voice say, "Do I make you happy, Bill?"

"Oh, Sally," he choked. Their arms clung for a moment, and then swiftly they met in a kiss that carried all the urgency and insistence of the hot afternoon ; all the compulsion of the high spring day.

Her trembling ceased. She wanted to breathe, and pushed him gently away. Their faces were still close, hands framing them, eyes searching, inarticulately wanting and hoping.

The dissatisfaction was stirring in her loins again, but this time there was no fear. From somewhere an echo of Fate, a shadow of the dispute, came whispering in to the back of her mind. "Don't ever go away, Bill," she begged.

Thoughts of the rumours at the station raced into his mind. He didn't move. He was still inches from

her, but the attention of his eyes had withdrawn. Should he tell her, he was thinking. But to Sally, the withdrawal of his mind behind the eyes could only mean one thing. She saw his face above her, framed against the sky. The sky. That was it. She would have to blot it out, make him forget it. Swiftly she put her arms about his neck and drew him down to her, blotting out the high blue. The impulsive gesture drained away the last of his self-control, and a hunger flooded through him as they lay with his body pressed along the firm young length of hers.

Only the reeds, hearing a message across the marshes, knew that this was not to be the moment when she would make him forget the sky. They got it from a passing boat at the same moment as Perdita began to squawk.

The gull's first cries went unheard by Sally and Bill, and then Sally heard it amongst the other warnings that were beginning to insist through her impulsive resolve.

"Wait, Bill," she said. She turned her head and looked up at the bird. It was fluttering and squawking above the dinghy. "It's someone coming," she gasped.

"It may not be." His voice was persuasive, his hands insistent.

"It is, Bill. I know. Please," her voice implored him.

He sat away and let her rise, watching her quickly brush the grass from herself with uneasy gestures. "There's a mast just coming around the bend."

She stood, silent, away from him, looking at a boat she couldn't yet see. He was gaining control now, and stood up. He went over to her. "I do love you, Bill,"

she said simply. He kissed her hair and they stood with arms about each other's waist, waiting for the boat.

"It's Soapy!" Sally said suddenly, a note of anxiety in her voice. Arms were still about waists, but minds were parting, moving away at tangents, following up the implications of Soapy's arrival.

Slowly the small sailing punt put in beside their craft, Soapy's silence ringing its warning in each of them. He came ashore, took a letter from his pocket and held it out to them.

"A policeman came and read this to me this morning," he said.

Bill took the letter and read it aloud. It was addressed to the eel-catcher from the Ministry for Land Acquisition and stated that the local privilege claimed by him had been investigated by the Treasury Solicitor. Their own officers in Norwich had also checked for any local knowledge of such a custom and no such knowledge could be found. They regretted therefore that he must remove from the area in question as it was now Air Ministry property and his presence constituted a trespass.

As he finished reading the letter, Sally turned to the little man, her voice full of dismay. "Oh, Soapy!"

"I did all I could," he told her. "Everything that Bookie said, I did."

"You couldn't have done more," Bill comforted him.

They had asked him to move at once, the eel-catcher continued. He was now on his way to the village to borrow a launch to tow his houseboat back to its old position.

For a long moment they were all silent, each searching his mind yet again for some way of averting the defeat that was drawing closer. Bill looked from one to the other. The little eel-catcher was puzzled, hurt that his efforts to help the village had failed. The look on Sally's face tugged at Bill, making him want to think of something, anything that could assist her and remove that lost, hopeless look. Soapy broke the silence, saying that the Air Force men had told him that they would start using the range in three days' time. At this Sally became desperate. Up till now the possibility of the area being used as a range had been vague, a threat hanging somewhere in the future. But now there was a date, a day. There was a finality about this that caused a panic to rise inside her.

"Three days! Then we must do something—anything. Let's go straight back to Harry Tilney's and get all the village together. Someone may think of something!"

"But, Sally," Bill pleaded, wanting to stop this frantic, futile beating of her wings against the cage of official decree. "It's too late now. There's nothing more that can be done. You have exhausted every possible idea." He moved closer to her and took her hand. "You're beaten now, Sally. There isn't anything you can do."

"I won't be beaten. There's still three days. We must think of something. We must."

"But all the legal, official ways have been tried. . . ."

"They won't get it. The Island of Children will always be a sanctuary. They have no right to it." Her voice was strong with a desperate determination.

Would reasoning do any good? "At least look at the Air Force point of view . . ." he began.

She snatched her hand away, anger beginning, unreasonably, to break through. "I don't want to know about the Air Force." She turned towards Soapy. "Are you coming back to Harry Tilney's?"

The eel-catcher agreed, stepped into the sailing punt and moved away down the river. Sally turned to Bill, her eyes wary and guarded. "Well? Are you coming?"

He looked at her, searching for some trace of the personal warmth of a few brief moments before. There was none. Here was determination, a choice between ideas, a maturity that could exclude personal feelings in the larger issue. The new strength in her made him love her all the more. He nodded in answer to her query and swiftly they launched the dinghy and sailed away.

The gull, Perdita, rose from the small boat and sped away before them towards distant Saltingsby.

The place where they had rested was silent again. The sun was still high above. The reeds still stood sentinel about the place. The slow waters still gurgled past. But the high heat had gone from the afternoon.

[6]

The sun was dropping away towards the edge of the marshes when they gathered at Harry Tilney's boat-yard. Soapy, his punt faster in the light air, had arrived before Sally and Bill and told his story at once to Mrs.

Thompson. He knew that was the surest way of making certain that no one would miss hearing the news. Then he had hurried away to tell Harry.

Soon they came streaming in, men and women, some from their jobs, others from housework. Old Circular had been 'phoned and he joined them too, coming in with Tom Wade, who had been about some personal business beyond the wood. Bill and Sally were there, sitting together on an upturned dinghy. Fanny and Joe Bates, Soapy, Harry Tilney and his wife, Mrs. Thompson; these and many more were sitting about now around the open end of the boatyard. At first the general reaction had been vociferous indignation. "We'll have to do something," they repeated again and again. Harry fumed about "meddling officials" in Whitehall. But it was all to no avail; no one could think of any plan for stopping the Air Force. They lapsed into a dull, hopeless silence. Away across the marshes the early evening calls of the birds began, drifting across to them as a reminder that they should bestir themselves to action. Frustration made Tilney irritable, and he rose and paced about, but all that came from him was another tirade against London.

Old Circular had been watching his daughter, knowing her attention was but half on the actual problem, and half on the implications it would have on her relationship with Bill. At Tilney's words he roused himself to comment, "Abuse is all very well. But are we going to do something, or is this just another meeting of protest?"

"What can we do?" Tilney's voice was angry.

Nobody had a suggestion to make. Fanny Bates murmured, "If only Bookie were here . . ." But Mrs. Tilney cut across her, declaring that it was legal nonsense that had beaten them all along.

"Rebellion. A good Suffolk rebellion," muttered Old Circular, but nobody paid any attention to him.

A long low whistle, followed by a snap of the fingers came from Tom Wade. They looked at him expectantly. "What is it, Tom?" He shook his head to their question and sat deep in thought, obviously turning some plan over in his mind. His attitude annoyed Harry, who demanded that if he had an idea he should tell them at once. Tom shook his head again, but turned to Soapy. "You know, maybe Bookie had the right idea. Would you go back there, Soapy, if some of us went with you?"

The little eel-catcher was not keen on the prospect. The Air Force men had told him that they would begin firing rockets in three days, and he had no wish to be there when that happened. Joe Bates joined Harry Tilney in enquiring what was on Tom's mind, but Tom now turned to Bill. "Bill, do you reckon you could let me know when the Air Force will be using the range?"

What was Tom up to? Everyone looked from him to Bill who sat undecided. "What do you want to know that for?" asked Tilney.

Tom Wade looked slowly around at them. "It's just an idea I've got. But I'd have to know exactly when the Air Force would be using the range."

"But what is your idea? Let's hear it," demanded Tilney.

"No, not yet," Tom told him. "Maybe it isn't legal. But it'd stop them . . . if I knew when they were coming."

"Well, Bill . . . ?"

"I . . . I don't know. . . ." Bill was unhappy at being put in such a position.

"I only want an hour or so's warning," Tom persuaded him.

They waited, hoping Bill would assist them. Mrs. Tilney suggested that he could always 'phone Sally when the aircraft were getting ready to take off. But Bill suddenly knew that he couldn't do it. "I'm sorry," he told them. "I couldn't give away Air Force information."

Sally turned to him now, throwing in her weight deliberately on the side of the village. "Tom only wants to know when they are going to use the range," she pointed out.

"I'm sorry, Sally, but I can't do it."

This was the split she had dreaded, and the tiny moment of fear inside her made her leap to widen the breach. "You can't!"

Bill recognised what was happening and tried to explain his position to them. "I want to see the Island of Children saved. But I am in the Air Force. I can't give away Service information."

The reasonableness of his argument made Sally even angrier and she flared out at him. "You mean you won't!"

Old Circular rose swiftly to his feet and moved towards Bill and Sally. "Now wait a minute," he pleaded. "The boy is quite right. Most of us have been

in the Services at some time or other, and we all know he can't do that."

Harry and one or two of them grumbled an agreement, but Tom Wade didn't think this was a time for such niceties. "It's a matter of whether he wants to help us or not," Tom declared. "But if that is the way you want it, then stay here and talk your heads off." He walked to the door and turned. "But remember that I have an idea that means action—if only someone can tell me the exact time the Air Force are using the range."

Mrs. Thompson couldn't contain her impatience. "Well, tell us what the idea is," she snapped.

"And have you repeat it to everyone—including the Air Force? No; maybe it isn't legal, so I'll keep it to myself. Now, who's for a beer?" Several of the men joined him and the gathering began to disperse. Old Circular saw his daughter and Bill sitting side by side, but not a word passing between them. He knew how miserable they must both feel. He walked across to them. "Coming for a beer, Bill?" he asked. Bill looked sideways at Sally, wanting to ask her, but unable to voice the questions that were pushing into his mind. Old Circular glanced swiftly at her and said, "You're coming of course, Sally?" But with a quiet defiance she stood up and said, "No. I want to talk to Fanny." She hurried away out of the shed. The lighthouse-keeper put an arm on the young airman's shoulder and they walked together after the village group.

The evening was not far from being one of the most miserable Bill had ever experienced. Certainly it was the most depressing he had passed in Saltingsby.

Later, in the bar, he was joined by a footsore Buster, but even his account of the accident with the speed-launch couldn't arouse Bill. The pub was quiet during the evening. Sally kept away from him and talked to Fanny, and when she returned to the lighthouse she refused to let him accompany her. Shortly afterwards Bill and Buster left the pub and began the walk back to the airfield.

What was going to happen now, Bill wondered. There was nothing more the village could do in their attempts to save the sanctuary. But what of the personal problem? Would Sally continue her attitude once the range became a fact? As he trudged along his mind went back to the afternoon, back to the sweetness of her and the eagerness of her body against his. She couldn't behave like that at one moment, and then put him out of her thoughts the next. Damn the whole situation. Why did the Air Force have to pick on that piece of land? Or why couldn't Sally have remained the same dreamer that she had been but a few weeks ago? That Sally would never have stood out against him like this. But even as these thoughts came he knew they were futile. She couldn't remain the same any more than the countryside could. Time was bringing its change not only to the ancient sanctuary, it was also working on Sally.

A mile along the road they came, in the warm dusk, across the figure of Flight Sergeant Campbell seated on a grassy bank beside the road. His bike was upturned in front of him and he was working on the rear wheel. Bill and Buster stopped and sat beside him.

"Puncture, Chiefy?" asked Bill.

"Several holes in it."

They watched him work in silence for a moment. Then Buster asked, "Where's Fanny?"

"She went off. Just because I had a puncture. Said she wasn't going to stay around here all night. As though it was my fault!"

"Women!" muttered Buster disgustedly.

"They certainly do get upset about the darndest things," Bill admitted.

"What difference could waiting a few more minutes have made?" the Flight Sergeant asked. "She had nowhere else to go."

Buster agreed with this. Fanny could at least have waited with him this afternoon and assisted him in bringing back some of the loose gear in the launch. "Just because you put a launch ashore they get mad and walk out on you," he complained.

They sat on by the roadside, the sea sounds washing across the marshes behind them and an occasional night call coming from some bird in the dykes along the road, and fed each other's moment of pity. "They make everything so personal," Bill explained. "If you were in a bus that ran over their dog, you'd be to blame even though you were only a passenger."

The Flight Sergeant turned to him. "What's your trouble?"

"Won't talk to me because I wouldn't give the village Air Force information."

Campbell nodded. "Yes. Fanny tried that one on me." He had finished the puncture-mending, and the trio rose and set off along the road towards the airfield—Campbell pushing his bike.

They talked intermittently of the work ahead of them. The modifications were all completed, and tomorrow the air tests of the Vampires would begin. On the third day from now the range firing practise would begin. There was a busy period ahead for all of them in the next few weeks, with little time to spare for worrying about their personal problems. These thoughts must have been running through all their minds, for they nodded in agreement when Buster spoke a thought aloud.

"Women!" he muttered once more. "Work—that's the only thing."

They walked on together through the gathering darkness.

CHAPTER VI

[1]

THERE was an expectancy in the very air of Fallowfield on the following morning when the first air tests were about to take place. For weeks the field had been dormant, lying there in wait, ready to unwind the gleaming projectiles along its runways and launch them forth into the skies. Now you could almost feel that giant spring tautening in anticipation as the morning grew taller out of the bright clear eastern sky. The rumours of an overseas posting were now on everybody's lips, causing an inner delight behind the hurryings of ground staff and aircrew alike. Today's flying would be the second positive step towards their objective. The ground work of modification was completed, now during the next two days all the airworthiness tests would be carried out, then the four weeks training on the new range would make them ready for service anywhere as a Ground Attack Squadron.

Out of the cheery briskness of the mechanics grew the second sound, that most exciting of all sounds, the whine of the jet engine starting up. Low and slow at first, almost gentle, but gathering in volume and rising in pitch until you feel that it is part of something inside you, something that mounts and swells incessantly, bearing you up and up until it seems that there is no further height that can be reached. Then just when the excitement is becoming unbearable the climax is

reached, the note steadies, and the aircraft taxis away.

Bill and Buster stood by as Squadron Leader Parsons ran-up his Vampire. Then he taxied away from them, swinging in a wide circle on to the perimeter track, progressing past the Control Tower, and then, after receiving his clearance from Flying Control, turning on to the end of the main runway. For a moment he was static there, pointing away to the east from where the light breeze was blowing, but then that note took on a new power and he was speeding down the clear, wide pathway, faster and faster until the ground could hold him no longer and he burst free from it and rose slowly into the air. Other aircraft followed until the airfield became one glorious stream of sound. The steady beat of the aircraft above, the rising sound of aircraft becoming airborne, the diminishing note of aircraft landing, the whine of taxi-ing aircraft, the clang of the fuel-bowsers refuelling the aircraft, the small noise of the motor engines as the Station transport went about its duties, an echoing ring of metal against metal somewhere in the emptiness of the hangars; all these sounds mixed and intermingled, rising and falling in waves, providing an accompaniment to the brisk business of the day.

In the afternoon they went out in sections and the people of Saltingsby heard them faintly as they went over, flying high. On former days they would have briefly recognised the sound and then dismissed it from their consciousness, but today the very first evidence of their approach seemed to make the whole village stand still for a moment, like that moment of immobility before flight or action when danger threatens.

Then the village breathed again and went about its work. Two days to go. Two days before the Island of Children would be used as a range. Earlier in the morning the local constable had come riding in on his bicycle and posted a notice beside the previous one on the board in the Open Place. It was headed with an Air Ministry warning and stated that the area in question was now officially Air Ministry property and would be used henceforth as an Air to Ground Firing range. It stated the safety precautions that would be in force and named the points where danger flags would be flown. The Norfolk people read it slowly and went silently away again. There was a desperation now in their attitude, a desperation born of their inability to combat the inevitable.

By evening all the air tests had been carried out and few of the aircraft needed much servicing. Early the following morning all the pilots left the station by cars and visited the Island of Children to look at the new range and become familiar with the layout. Their cheery enthusiasm lasted them most of the way across the marshes, but Parsons noticed with surprise that a quietness descended upon them when they were standing in the centre of the range. It was like a party of noisy tourists who suddenly realise that they are in some great cathedral. He had been conscious of the atmosphere when he had paid his solo visits, but that it should affect a whole squadron of men surprised him greatly. A few birds flew unconcernedly near the river. The Small Wood appeared to be deserted, and only an occasional murmur of bird sounds came from the crescent-shaped patch of water. It was uncanny,

this silence, this lack of fear. It was almost as though to the birds they, the humans, were not present. He felt again that strange unreality seeping through him and he almost wanted to shout aloud to startle the birds into an awareness of their presence. He became brisker than was his normal attitude on such occasions and pointed out the various features and located surrounding land marks on the large-scale map he carried with him. During the afternoon each pilot would add to his knowledge of the range by making dummy runs, flying in low over the targets. The targets, two huge white squares of canvas stretched on wooden frames, were now in position. Several hundred yards from them the chequered hut that was to be Range Control stood out against the background of reeds. Parsons visited it, and Edwards showed him where the land-line stretched low across the water and then away in the direction of Fallowfield. The party walked back along the river bank for some distance before striking off towards Saltingsby, and they saw at regular intervals the Air Ministry warning notices that punctuated the approaches to the new range.

Sally was standing in front of the living quarters beside the lighthouse, mixing some special food in the bowl that was kept for Perdita. It was another warm afternoon and her thoughts were drifting vaguely as she prepared the food. When the first aircraft made its dummy run and came screaming low towards her from the direction of the sanctuary, her thoughts were miles away from the dispute. In an involuntary movement she whipped around to wave after the plane, but then

checked herself as she remembered Bill and remembered that the firing tests would commence tomorrow. Her anger and resentment of two days ago had gone from her now, leaving only something approaching sadness, a sense of loss, and she knew that the feeling had as much to do with Bill as with the sanctuary. Slowly, unhappily, she resumed preparation of the food and then, absently, put it in its regular position for the gull. The gull came at once from near the lighthouse and perched on the bowl, but it ignored the food. Sally was aware that the bird was watching her, and as she stroked its feathers with a finger she became conscious once again of the feeling, stronger of late, that the bird was waiting, patiently waiting, for something. Why had this bird, this bird that she had named Perdita after the Roman child, chosen to come and live with her at the lighthouse? There must be some reason, one of those unaccountable impulses from the heart of the lonely marshes, that had sent this strange, detached bird to her. Sometimes she felt that there must be some kind of consciousness deep in the solitude of the marshes, a consciousness that directed many of the small happenings which might, at first, seem to be no more than coincidence, but which were happier, warmer, more personal than just that. Was it mere coincidence that each winter took her along to the high point on the coastline at the very moment when the first of the wild geese came winging in from the cold north? For years she had never missed this first arrival; knew when to go to that place. And this same knowledge told her now that something was about to happen, something that was connected with Perdita.

And the something was the reason why the gull had come to her, this was the thing for which it had been waiting. That was why the strange feeling had grown stronger of late. Without knowing why, she realised that in some way it all had to do with the loss of the sanctuary . . . with Bill. What of Bill? Another aircraft came hurtling away from the direction of the sanctuary and with an angry gesture she turned and went in out of the afternoon sunshine.

By the late afternoon all the pilots had made their dummy runs. The aircraft had been checked and made ready for the following day. The land-line to the range was in working order. All was ready. It had been a busy two days for all the personnel at Fallowfield, and Buster, Bill, and Flight Sergeant Campbell as they watched the last aircraft being wheeled into the hangars were not sorry that it was successfully over. The next four weeks would also be busy, but with the more routine pressure of keeping aircraft serviceable. They strolled together along the front of the hangars and off towards the quarters, leaving a strangely silent and empty field relaxed in the late afternoon sun. Only one aircraft still stood out on the apron. Not a Vampire, but the Meteor which the Group Captain always flew as his personal aircraft. A neat flyer of vast experience, he was the sort of man who always belittled his own skill. "Fly in a Vampire?" he would say. "Not me. I like something with two engines. Much safer." It was one of those lies he delighted in maintaining and in which the officers of the station always co-operated. It was routine that when he was flying somewhere, Squadron Leader Parsons or someone would say,

"Take my Vampire, sir," and always received the stock reply.

Parsons, the Adjutant, and Flight Lieutenant Edwards—the Range Controller—were waiting for the Group Captain now. He came into the room, carrying a large briefcase and wearing his flying suit, and apologised for calling them together at this late hour of the day. "I've just had an urgent call to go up to Group Headquarters. I'm taking off in fifteen minutes."

"My aircraft is serviceable, sir. Take that," Parsons said.

"Fly in a Vampire? Not me. I like something with two engines. Much safer."

"When will you be back?"

"Late tomorrow. That's why I want to run over all the details of tomorrow's flying now before I leave. There must be no hitches, no possible delays. Group are insistent upon that."

On the wall was a large-scale map of the target area. The targets, control hut, and communications were all marked. So too were the flags, danger notices, and other warnings that had been erected on the approaches to it. Flight Lieutenant Edwards pointed out the land-line. The Group Captain wasn't completely happy about it and asked if there was any traffic along this water.

"No, sir. Nobody uses the river now and we have erected warning signs all along it. The line will only be in use for a few days anyway." He went on to ask about the radio equipment, and the Group Captain said he would have another word with Group about

speeding up the delivery. Edwards detailed the method they would use meanwhile. He, as Range Controller, would spot the rockets and report on them by land-line to Flying Control, who would relay the information by radio to the aircraft. "A bit cumbersome, sir, and slow, too," he concluded.

The Group Captain then checked on flying procedure. In the morning Squadron Leader Parsons was going to make the first firing tests on his own. Then in the afternoon he would take out eight aircraft in two sections of four. Various aspects of the flying were discussed and the Group Captain, satisfied that everything was in order, strolled towards the door.

"I know the permanent notices are in place," he remarked, "but what about Saltingsby? Is there any special warning for them?"

The Adjutant told him that a special flagpole had been erected in the village and that the local constable would hoist a red flag there an hour before Squadron Leader Parsons made his first test.

Parsons strolled with his Commanding Officer towards the Meteor. He learned that by tomorrow he would probably know their overseas destination. That was part of the reason for the visit to G.H.Q. The Group Captain was well satisfied with the way everything had turned out. He still regretted the conflict with the local people and mentioned yet again how the legend of the place intrigued him. "They certainly tried everything in their power to stop us. But now they seem to have given in. In a way I'm rather disappointed. I thought they'd have fought to the last ditch, particularly since I visited the area. It has a

quality that affects you strongly. I wonder if there is any truth in those stories?"

He hadn't heard the story of the Roman child Perdita, and Parsons told it to him now as they strolled. "It is so typically Norfolk," agreed the Group Captain. "The stories you find in other parts of England have, even in their strangeness, a down-to-earth quality about them. But here—I don't know why it is—almost a quality of fantasy exists that makes you accept even the most unlikely things. It's not only the country; it's the people, too. As though some of the lonely strength and ancient rhythm of the sea and the marshes flowed through the very people themselves."

They arrived at the aircraft, where the mechanics were waiting, and the Group Captain climbed into the cockpit. The first touch of the controls brought the technical world of his choosing flowing back to him, and the world of ancient legend sank from his mind. He took off, and as he flew over Saltingsby, high in the evening sunlight, there was no thought in his mind of the past but only an appreciation for what the future held. Below, the sun had slipped away and left the sanctuary in shadow; he still flew high in the sunlight.

[2]

Tom Wade was making his way through the thin wood that runs behind the sandhills just to the north of Saltingsby. His pace was slow, but not leisurely, for Tom was angry. Tom didn't like being beaten, and

now it looked as though the Air Force had beaten him and the people of Saltingsby. This morning, a bright warm morning buffeted by a gusty wind, they were to start using the range. He slashed at the bushes as he pushed his way forward. It wasn't that the Island of Children meant as much to him as it did to most of the villagers, it was just this prospect of being defeated. The sentimental associations had no place in Tom's mind. He wasn't the sentimental type. In the village they regarded him with a mixture of awe and pride. He was tough and fearless, but there was something behind his toughness that made them uneasy at times. As a child he had been in all the trouble that had occurred for miles around. At a very early age he earned a reputation for recklessness ; in fact, he seemed to seek out danger and welcome it. He had no settled occupation ; poaching, a period on the trawlers from Yarmouth, local odd jobs, all these filled up his earlier years. Then came the war which he seemed positively to welcome, being the first man in the district to enlist. From then on they had been proud of Tom Wade, for he had risen to the rank of Sergeant and been decorated twice. After the war he had been restless. He tried the sea again, and even a short period of service with the lifeboat over at Cromer, but quickly tired of both. He wasn't even aware himself that after the constant thrill of risking life in battle, no job could ever thrill him again. Danger, that thrill of fear, the possibility of death, these were the things Tom Wade needed without knowing it. Now this idea of his for combating the Air Force had been stillborn. That too made him angry, angry with frustration, for there

would have been danger in his idea and he ached for the chance to carry it out.

He reached the end of the wood and came into the churchyard that stands on the edge of the Open Place. Caught against the accustomed blue and white of the sky, a large splash of colour suddenly attracted his attention. It was bright red. It was the warning flag being hoisted on the newly erected flagpole. He threw away the stick he had been carrying and strode angrily towards the Open Place.

The constable finished hoisting the flag, mounted his bicycle and rode away. The red cloth flapped in the gusty wind dragging every village eye towards it. Joe Bates and Fanny saw it from the pub. Mrs. Thompson saw it from the store. Mrs. Tilney saw it and told Harry. Gradually, slowly, the news went around the village, and they began to drift out from the houses and the places of work towards the front of Mrs. Thompson's store. Sally came up from the boatyard with Harry Tilney, and Old Circular was with them too. There was a slow, defeated, sullenness about them. To tear down the flag would not help them, but it was the desire of each one.

It was into this slow gathering, moving restlessly under the red flag high in the bright windy morning that a spluttering sound edged its way. As it came closer the crowd heard it, and turned towards the church around which the road ran in from distant Norwich. Sally was the first to recognise the note of the ancient car that belonged to Bookie, the retired solicitor who had been absent during the past few weeks. But there was no hope in her recognition;

he was too late now to be of any assistance to them.

The battered car stopped in the centre of the Open Place, and quietly they greeted the returning man. Soapy, the eel-catcher, was seated beside him in the car, for he had picked him up a mile along the road. He pointed towards the red flag and asked what it was. Harry Tilney told him it was the signal that the range would be used for firing practice that day.

"Then I'm just in time," announced Bookie.

"You're too late," they replied. "We have tried everything, but the Air Force have the land now. It is theirs."

"Oh, no, it isn't," Bookie laughed. "That is where they are all wrong. It isn't Crown land at all."

The people who had been through all the stages of the struggle looked warily at each other, not daring to give voice to a hope that at this late hour they might yet be able to save the sanctuary. Sally spoke their query. "Does it make any difference whether it is Crown land or not? Isn't it too late, anyway?"

"Of course it makes a difference. They are exceeding their powers. There is no authority at all for the supposed transfer of the land to the Air Ministry."

Harry Tilney, a small spark of hope lighting again inside him, became angry at the legal generalities that he knew would follow. "I'm not interested in authorities or legal nonsense any more," he growled. "All I want to know is: can we stop them?"

The crowd caught his mood and pressed around the car in a strong murmur of agreement. Bookie realised the urgency in their attitude and quickly told them the facts of his discovery. He had been carrying out some

research in connection with a book he was proposing to write about Norfolk and had come across some startling facts. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a great deal of the land in this area had been owned by the Church. The whole of the Island of Children was included in the Church property. Then, in 1537 the monasteries were suppressed and their lands taken over by the Crown. But a few years later there was a rebellion under a leader named Kett. The nearby Abbey of St.-Benet-at-Holme rendered valuable assistance, and for their help were rewarded by the return of some of their old lands.

At the mention of these facts Harry Tilney could not resist throwing a meaning glance towards Old Circular. "So," he claimed triumphantly, "we supported Kett's rebellion, did we? And here was silly Suffolk trying to tell me . . ."

Bookie interrupted him: "We helped to put it down."

In spite of the moment, Sally couldn't help a half-smile at her father's enjoyment of his victory over the Norfolk man. But the older solicitor was continuing his story. "The point is that part of the lands which were returned to the Church included the Island of Children. It is Church land."

"But that was centuries ago," declared Sally. "And there is no Abbey of St.-Benet-at-Holme any more. It has been in ruins for centuries."

"All that is left of the building, is a small ruin," agreed Bookie, "but the title still exists. In fact, the present Bishop of Norwich sits in the House of Lords under the title of the Abbot of St.-Benet-at-Holme.

No, there is no doubt at all about it. I have checked it thoroughly, and the Island of Children belongs to the Church."

A delighted smile swept through the crowd, and for a moment they felt victory to be within the realm of possibility again. Then a quick gust of wind whipped the red flag into a loud slap and drew their attention to it.

"But are we too late?" Sally asked.

"And will the fact that it is not Crown land prevent the Air Force from using it?" demanded Tilney.

"Once they are advised that it is Church land, they can't possibly use it. Not until a full investigation is made. At least it will delay them." His voice was definite.

"But they are firing there this morning." Sally was suddenly desperate again. "We must tell them at once. It will be no use tomorrow. Once they have fired their rockets there, the birds would never use it as a sanctuary again. We must do something at once."

The crowd shouted their agreement and Harry Tilney was swift to action. "Bookie, you'll drive us to Fallowfield. We'll tell the Air Force at once." He jumped in the car beside Bookie and told Sally to get in as well. Three of them would be enough, he decided. Sally hastened to get into the car, but then stopped and searched around for Perdita.

"What's wrong?" Harry demanded.

"Perdita. Where is she?"

"Never mind her now. We can't take her with us."

Sally climbed into the car. What had made her suddenly think of taking the gull with her? The idea

puzzled her. And yet she felt a strong need to have the bird with her. A puzzled half-knowledge of something came swimming up and then disappeared again. She shook the idea from her as the car rattled away out of the Open Place.

The crowd stood in the bright, windy place shouting wishes of good luck after the trio in the car. The old men, sitting on the seat in the sun, enjoyed the excitement without bothering to enquire what it was about. And from high up on top of the square-towered church a seagull took steady flight and dropped down over the small car winding along the marsh road. Several times it dipped down over the car, but then, when the vehicle turned off on to the side road towards Fallowfield, the bird ceased its escort duty and flew away southward across the timeless marshes.

[3]

Bill stood beside the Vampire watching Squadron Leader Parsons shorten his 'chute straps. The officer turned, put one foot on the catch-step that Bill had pulled out, and vaulted lightly into the cockpit. The step clicked automatically into place, but Bill pulled it out again and climbed up beside the cockpit, easing his weight with one foot on the wing. He leaned in and assisted the pilot with the straps.

"All O.K., sir?" he asked.

Parsons nodded his approval. The aircraft had behaved beautifully on the two previous days. In fact, it occurred to him, it had given no trouble since the

young Corporal had taken over as his personal mechanic. There was never any waiting for something to go wrong and then fixing it; somehow the boy seemed to anticipate the trouble and thus keep the aircraft in perfect running order. As he checked his instruments he realised the young airman was still perched beside him and he glanced enquiringly at him.

"This is victory for the Air Force, eh, sir?"

"The range? Yes, I suppose you could call it that. They are all pretty upset, I suppose?" Bill nodded and the pilot continued: "I haven't liked to go into the pub this last week. Seemed better to keep away with this feeling about it. I hope they don't think too hardly of us after this morning. . . ." He paused and then roused himself to action. "Well, better get cracking," he said more briskly. "I'm due over the range at half-past."

"Good luck, sir," said Bill automatically. And then as he jumped down he added with a grin, "Pretend it's a tropical jungle, sir!"

Parsons glanced quickly at him and then grinned in return. So the airmen were guessing the same as he was about the destination, were they? But all he said was, "You blokes know too much for your own good!"

The trolley-acks were in position, contact was made and the whine started on its upward journey. Within a few minutes the aircraft was taxi-ing swiftly away along the perimeter track, a double pair of rockets slung beneath its wings.

Bill was still watching the aircraft, his thoughts racing ahead of it to the range, when Buster strolled up and joined him.

"I wish that was one of the Meteor trainers." Bill nodded in the direction of Parson's Vampire. "I haven't been up for weeks."

Buster, however, soon took his attention away from the aircraft. The young Cockney had been passing the gate when Sally, Bookie and Tilney had been at the guardroom. One of the Service Police Corporals had called to him and asked him to show the trio over to the Adjutant's office. On the way there Sally had told him about the Island of Children being Church land and had asked him to tell Bill. "She seemed very excited," finished Buster. "In fact she sent her love to you."

Bill was delighted at the news, but then he stopped and swung back towards the airfield again. The Vampire was just becoming airborne towards the end of the main runway. "It's too late, Buster," he said. "Even if it is Church land, it is too late. He is due over the target in a few minutes."

The same thought was occurring to the Adjutant as he sat easily on the corner of his desk listening to the story which Bookie was telling him. The story seemed to have the ring of truth about it and doubtless it could be checked quite simply. He knew that Squadron Leader Parsons was on his way to the range at this moment, but decided not to tell them this fact, as there was no use in upsetting them unnecessarily. Harry Tilney and Sally were leaning forward in their chairs watching him as Bookie finished his recital of the facts he had discovered. There was a slight pause and then the Air Force man said, "Your information certainly sounds as though it is correct. Now, will you write to

the Ministry for Land Acquisition, or do you want me to pass it through Air Ministry channels?"

The three Norfolk people looked quickly from one to the other. They hadn't expected this. Surely some immediate action could be taken, they thought.

Tilney said, "Do we have to put it in writing? That will only waste more time. Can't you do something about it immediately?"

The Adjutant pointed out that such matters as allocation of land for purposes of defence training were dealt with at a much higher level. He was sorry, but the matter would have to be referred to London for a decision.

Sally was not concerned so much with the general dispute now. Today's was the urgent issue. The Island of Children held thousands of birds nesting in peace, a peace that had lasted for centuries. She knew that once that safety was shattered by the firing of rockets the birds would in all probability never breed there again. At the least it would be decades before they dared to return. She appealed now to the Adjutant. "Even if you can't make a decision about the range, you can at least stop the flying. Just for a day or two while they investigate our claim. You can't let them use the sanctuary now. You mustn't!"

He knew that she was upset, and so he addressed himself to the two men. "I'm sorry, but flying is quite outside my province. I have no authority at all to cancel training."

"Then who has?" asked Bookie.

"The Commanding Officer, but I'm afraid he is

away. He had to go to Group Headquarters and won't be back until later today."

"But someone must be in charge." Harry Tilney was becoming angry.

"Naturally."

"Then who is it? We'll see him."

"I'm afraid that is impossible. Squadron Leader Parsons is the Squadron Commander, and . . ."

Sally came eagerly to her feet. "I know him. You must let us see him. I know he'd help us."

There was no dodging the issue now and the Adjutant rose to his feet. "I'm sorry. Squadron Leader Parsons is out making the first tests at the moment. In fact," he glanced at his watch, "he should be over the target at any minute."

In the desperate silence that followed the Adjutant left them and walked through the open connecting door into the Group Captain's office. He switched on the V.H.F. set and called back to the three in the other room. "You will probably be able to hear him on this in a minute."

They stood silently, but then as the voice of Parsons came metallically from the radio speaker they moved slowly towards the communicating door.

"Hello, Tower. This is Archer One," came the voice. "I'm making a dummy run first. Get Range Control to report on my run and then relay it through to me. I just want to prove to Edwards that the system works all right. Over."

An answering voice came from the speaker on the wall, "Roger, Archer One. Range Control are standing by waiting for your dummy run. Over."

There was another brief moment of silence, and then they heard Parsons' voice again, an impersonal voice coming from the small square speaker on the office wall. "Archer One to Tower. Flying level now at Angles One Two. Making a dummy run now. Here we go."

There was silence from the voice now, only the sound of the aircraft, caught by the pilot's microphone, came to them in the office. Down, down, down they heard the plane dive. Even though they knew he was not going to fire, there was a tightening in their throats as the sound increased in pitch. Nobody moved. The Adjutant didn't look round at the other three standing by the door. Then out of the long noise of the jet came a changed note as the aircraft pulled out of the dive and climbed away over the target.

The Adjutant turned now, and the others moved uneasily. The next dive would be the real thing. Still nobody spoke. Then from the speaker came the voice of the officer at Flying Control. "Tower to Archer One. Range Control report your dummy run concluded and angle correct. Are you requiring all details of your test noted? Over."

Again the momentary pause and then came the metallic voice in reply. "Archer One to Tower. Yes. You'd better take the details. It may help in case there is any consistent inaccuracy in the modifications. I will give altitude; time target is in my sights; and height at release. Over."

They waited, but no more was heard from the voice on the wall for a long moment. The silence went on, it seemed, interminably. Tilney shuffled uneasily. "What is happening?" he asked.

The Adjutant, trying not to look at Sally, replied quietly, "He is climbing again. He has to get into position at twelve thousand feet. Then he will make the first real test."

The words sounded coldly, inexorably, bouncing from wall to wall in the small room. They seemed to be shut up here in a box of unreality while away high in the sunlit space the aircraft was preparing to discharge its rockets on the place they had striven so hard to defend. It couldn't be happening, thought Sally. She couldn't be standing here helpless, listening to the voice of the man who was doing it. She wanted to run from the room, but found herself unable to move. Out of the pregnant silence came a click and the voice of Parsons once more. A voice cool, easy, unexcited. "All right, Tower," it said conversationally. "Flying level at twelve thousand. Single pair firing test. Rocket pair A selected. Beginning dive now."

The noise of the aircraft changed its note as it peeled over into the dive.

"Eleven thousand feet," said the voice.

Tilney and Bookie moved forward beside Sally, listening intently to the set.

"Ten thousand."

The Adjutant felt the electric tension of the small room, and found himself hardly able to breathe.

"Nine thousand. Target wavering in sights."

Sally began to clench her hands, her nails biting into her palms.

"Eight thousand. Target steady in sights." Parsons' voice was rising in pitch as the excitement of the dive took hold of him.

Sally was trembling now, hands clenched, teeth biting hard into her lips.

"Seven thousand. Target steady in sights." The voice was rising. The sound of the engines, caught by the microphone, came through to them now in a scream.

"Six thousand. Target steady in sights."

Oh, no. It can't end like this, thought Sally. Please, God, don't let it.

"Five thousand. Target steady in sights." Parsons was almost shouting now.

The strain was becoming too much. She didn't think she would be conscious to hear the end of the dive. If only she could rush away. Anything to stop that voice.

"Four thousand. Target steady. . . . Look out!" An involuntary yell was followed by a curse and a wild scramble of sound. They heard the note of the aircraft change. It seemed to have pulled out of the dive. What had happened? But no voice came yet from the speaker on the wall. The Adjutant, his thoughts now all on the pilot, moved closer to the speaker, trying hopelessly to drag some clue from it. The moment went on unbearably although the sound of the aircraft continued. Then came the voice of Parsons again.

"Hello, Tower," the voice was a little unsteady. "Have had some bad luck. Something hit my wind-screen and blacked it out. A bird of some sort I expect. Sorry to startle you by yelling like that. It shook me, though. Am cancelling my run and returning to base. Over."

The Adjutant didn't wait to hear any reply from

Flying Control, but hastily switched off the set and moved towards the door.

"Will he be all right?" Tilney's voice was cautious with inexperience of the dangers in such matters.

"I hope so," the Adjutant's voice was strained. "It's no simple matter landing with a blacked-out windscreen. I'm sorry, but I must see him come in. You'll have to excuse me."

"Can we come with you?" The query came from Bookie.

The Adjutant agreed, and the two men followed him at once. Only Sally was left standing in the same position, her face still turned to the radio set, tears streaming down her face.

"Perdita," she whispered.

[4]

Now that he was returning slowly towards Fallowfield Airfield, Squadron Leader Parsons was able to concentrate on the confusion of events that had crowded the past few moments.

At the climax of the dive, he decided, there must have been a flash of something in front of the windscreen, although he had not consciously noticed it at the time. When his windscreen splintered and an explosion cracked through the small cockpit, pieces of glass spattered the inside of the plane. None touched his face or helmet, although several pieces were buried in the wooden head-rest behind him. This made him believe now that he must have ducked very quickly

at the moment of impact. But automatically, even with his head down, he had managed to pull the aircraft out of the dive. Then when he was certain that he was climbing slightly, he tried to sit up again, but the buffeting was too severe. He eased the throttle and opened the air-brakes to reduce speed on the shallow climb. A check showed that his air speed was dropping to about 200 knots, and soon after he was able to sit up. It was then that he had contacted base and decided to return at once.

Now, with flaps lowered, but the air-brakes closed, he was cruising home at a steady 150 knots. It was not a comfortable flight though, as there was still an amount of buffeting. In addition to the hole in the windscreen, the rest of it was severely opaqued and any forward vision was extremely difficult. He sweated slightly at the thought of having to land in these circumstances. A gusty wind had been blowing all day, and the additional load of four rockets wouldn't make matters any easier. Gradually he eased the plane down to about 1,500 feet and flew in on a long approach to Fallowfield.

On the airfield they waited for him to come in. They had opened the windows and come out on to the balcony of Flying Control. Nearby a jeep raced in and halted at the edge of the perimeter track. In it were the Adjutant, Bookie, Harry Tilney and Sally. All along the field, from both ends of the hangars, airmen were coming slowly out. News of the mishap had spread quickly. It was going to be a tricky landing.

Bill stood with Buster and Flight Sergeant Campbell, and then pointed away to the west as the Vampire

materialised out of the sky, coming in low. They could see that it was not going to make a normal circuit, but approach in a direct landing.

Down the aircraft dropped towards the field, slowly, almost jerkily. A small murmur ran through the airmen grouped along the field. "He'll do it." "Best pilot we've got."

The Adjutant was standing up in his jeep, watching the Vampire dropping, dropping, slowly towards the near end of the runway. Then the Vampire was inside the confines of the field; in a moment it would touch down. A gust of wind slammed across the field, catching the aircraft and seeming to make it bounce in the air. A chill froze each onlooker for a moment for it appeared that in the wobbling one wing-tip must surely touch the ground. Then she rose slightly, levelled up, and began to drop in towards the runway again.

"He'll never do it. He's too far down the runway," groaned Bill.

"Give her the gun. Pull her up and go round again," prayed the Adjutant.

But the aircraft came down again, touched, bounced slightly and then settled jerkily on the runway. Still it raced on, towards the fence at the eastern end, brakes screaming in an effort to halt the progress. Gradually, slowly, the speed dropped away from it and on the outer edge of the perimeter track the tail slewed violently around and the aircraft came taxi-ing back towards the apron.

The Adjutant literally mopped his brow in relief and sank back on to the seat of the jeep. Bookie gave

him a moment or so, and then brought up once again the object of their visit. He reminded the Air Force man that he had said that Squadron Leader Parsons could authorise cancellation of flying training. Would it, therefore, be possible for them to see Parsons? The Adjutant agreed to contact the Squadron Leader at once and put the problem up to him. Leaving them at his office, he went over to Flying Control.

As soon as he was alone with Parsons, the Adjutant began to tell him all the facts just as Bookie had related them to him. Parsons heard him out to the end with increasing worry.

"Where are they now?" he asked.

"In my office," replied the Adjutant. "I asked them to wait there while I talked to you."

Parsons, still in his flying suit, paced about the room. What was he to do? The story was probably true, but could he trust them? They had claimed it was a sanctuary, and that had been disproved. They had claimed an ancient fishing right, and that had proved to be without basis. What if this were just another desperate attempt to stop the area being used as a range?

"How long would it take to check their story?" he asked.

"Not less than two days, I should say. It might be longer."

Two days. Valuable time when he had only four weeks in which to get the squadron ready for overseas duty. It was the devil of a decision to be faced with. If he stopped the training and then their claim was not upheld, he would have lost valuable time. If he went

ahead with the training and their story proved to be correct, there would be the deuce of a row. Either way it was a difficult choice. Either way somebody stood to lose something. Which was the more important, the sentimental associations of a bird sanctuary or the national necessity of a thoroughly trained Air Force? He realised that he was trying to swing the balance towards his own view. Irritably he paced the room.

The Adjutant watched him, wanting to help him in some way, but knowing that the younger man must make his own decision. "I told them that officially they should make their case known in writing to the Ministry for Land Acquisition," he proffered.

"Oh, damn what's official. What's the right thing?"

Parsons had stopped directly in front of the Adjutant to ask this direct question. The older man paused for a moment. Then, quietly, he said, "Remember you are going overseas."

Parsons stood looking at him steadily, then turned and walked away to the window. Out in the gusty noon the Vampires were drawn up on the apron. Air-men were loading the rockets on to them for the afternoon tests. Shortly, in a matter of weeks only, they might be doing this in action against the enemy. He stood watching for a moment, then turned around to face the Adjutant. "All right," he said calmly. "Let's go to your office and tell them."

The swift events of the morning had taken all the excitement from Bookie, Tilney, and Sally. The downhearted beginning, following by Bookie's arrival with his hopeful news, the frustration of the interview with the Adjutant, the agony of hearing Parsons' test

flight, and the drama of his landing with the damaged aircraft; all these had combined to leave them feeling rather flat. Now Bookie and Tilney stood about the Adjutant's office, waiting. Sally sat quietly, half-dazed by something that she instinctively knew, but even now would not admit to herself.

The door opened and Parsons came in, followed by the Adjutant. Sally rose urgently and went to him. "Mr. Parsons, that bird you hit—what was it?"

His mind concentrated on the larger problem, he dismissed her question as of no consequence. "It was just a bird," he stated and addressed himself to the two men. "I've discussed this claim of yours with the Adjutant. If you will let me have it immediately in writing I will see that there is no delay in forwarding it to Air Ministry."

There was a tiny shocked silence. "But that will take days," Sally gasped. "And what will happen in the meantime?"

"I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid the training must go on."

"But . . . but . . ." Sally couldn't continue. This morning, a brief half-hour ago, everything had seemed hopeless, but by some near miracle the test had been stopped. Was all that now going for naught? She could think of nothing further to say or do. All coherent thought had gone from her.

Bookie made one last effort. "Aren't you exceeding your power?" he asked.

Parsons retained his patience, knowing how much this must mean to them. "I would be exceeding my powers if I cancelled this important training," he

explained. He looked from one to the other, trying to avoid the stricken look on the girl's face. He half-turned towards the door. "I must ask you to excuse me now. I have to see to the repairs on my plane, and I have a Squadron target practice at three o'clock."

For some reason Harry Tilney, as he watched Parsons go through into the other room, found the words "three o'clock" insisting themselves upon his consciousness. There was some reason why he had to remember that time.

The Adjutant closed the door behind Squadron Leader Parsons and turned back to the three people still standing in his office.

"There is nothing more we can do?" Bookie asked.

The Adjutant explained that all that was left now was for their claim to be forwarded through the normal channels. If he could be of any assistance in expediting the matter . . .

"But three o'clock this afternoon?" Sally asked desperately.

"That must stand."

Silently they left him and went out into the pale chill of the hot noon. Several airmen, passing them as they made their way towards the gate, gazed curiously at the dejected figures and then hurried on about their work. The industrious sounds of the airfield drifted across to them, but they were unconscious of it all as they climbed into the small car and drove back towards Saltingsby.

Could this be the same road they had taken an hour before? Overhead the same family of clouds sailed, but now they were bunching up, spreading in layers over

the whole of the blue. Those were the same reeds that had jostled lightly at their passing, but now they were tossing in an angrier movement. As the wind whipped across the marshes it seemed as though a giant hand was smacking flatly at the face of Broadland, leaving great, bruised furrows along the reeds. As they skirted the thin wood, the sound of the sea came in more loudly. It was as though a skirmish was beginning right across the land; the ebb tide battling with the opposing wind; the reeds too defying the wind; the sun trying to pierce the clouds which were coming up in battalions at the orders of the wind.

Sally descended from the car at the Open Place and, with a bare few words to Bookie and Harry Tilney, left them and went over the gap in the sandhills and along the beech towards the lighthouse. The wind whipped at the sand, sending it spurting up against her legs as she walked, and tossing her dress and her hair irritatingly about her. But she walked on as though in a trance, oblivious of the wind or the triumphant shafts of brightness that now and again shot through the clouds.

Up the grassy slope she went and stood for several long minutes, waiting in the small garden. Nothing happened. She went into the house and put some of the special food in the bowl that was reserved for the gull, Perdita. She went out again and placed it in the usual position. For twenty minutes she waited there.

Then the sun went in, and she took up the bowl and emptied it and returned indoors.

The telephone rang.

"Hello, Sally?" It was Bill's voice. "Buster told me

you had been over here. Isn't it wonderful news about the Church land? Hello. Are you there?"

She murmured something in reply.

"What happened with the Adjutant? You are lucky you were not too late. You would have been if Mr. Parsons hadn't hit this bird. Bit of luck for you, wasn't it?"

It was some time before she realised that she had hung up the receiver. She stood there for a long moment before it began to shrill again. She walked out of the room and down on to the beach and away towards Saltingsby, leaving the bell ringing insistently in the empty lighthouse.

CHAPTER VII

[1]

THE pilots at Fallowfield had been waiting some ten minutes when, at ten-past two, Squadron Leader Parsons arrived at the Squadron Office, where the briefings were held. He had been making a final check of his aircraft and was satisfied that it was once again at one hundred per cent serviceability. He was not so satisfied about his decision towards the village people. He knew it was the only decision he could have taken, especially in view of the Group Captain's final warning the previous day that nothing must hold up the training. Now he was determined to go through with it, but nevertheless he was still unhappy at the situation.

He apologised to the pilots for keeping them waiting and then got straight down to the business of the afternoon. Those who noticed the extra brusqueness of his manner wrongly attributed it to the experience with the damaged aircraft just before lunch.

A time-check was made, and positions in the formations were gone over on the blackboard. Then before getting down to the details of the exercise, he decided to check with the Range Controller.

"What is it like down there?" he asked on the field 'phone.

"Lonely," came the reply. "Haven't seen a blessed soul all day. The weather might be a bit tricky for you. This wind is blowing a lot of that North Sea scud about.

It is pretty thin stuff, though. The sun keeps on breaking through it for minutes at a time so there should be enough gaps for you to see the targets."

Parsons checked with him about the direction of the wind, which he learned was strong and gusty and blowing right across the targets.

Replacing the receiver, he got down at once to the job in hand.

Eight aircraft would take part in the afternoon's firing practice. They would be in two sections, Red Section and Blue Section, with Parsons leading Red Section. Starting buttons would be pressed at 1440 hours in order to take off at 1445 hours—a quarter to three, civilian time. The take off would be in rapid succession and they would form up immediately so as to be over the targets at 1500 hours.

A pilot wanted to ask a question, but Parsons asked him to leave it till the end of the briefing.

"This is all old stuff," he continued. "We have been over it a dozen times. Now, here is the chart of the range. These are the two targets. No. 1 is here by this crescent-shaped patch of water. No. 2 target—to the right of it as we approach—is over towards the river bank there. My section will go in first at one-thousand-yard intervals. We'll begin to dive at twelve thousand feet, picking up the target and holding it in our sights from eight thousand feet downwards. Between two thousand feet and fifteen hundred feet you will fire one pair of rockets and then break away outwards—repeat outwards—from the targets. Then return to altitude and wait for the next attack."

Frequencies, distances between sections, and other

matters were discussed and Parsons strolled to the window to take a look at the cloud which Flight Lieutenant Edwards had reported. It was low, but patchy and fast-moving. He decided that so long as there were enough gaps to fix the position of the range, there was no reason why they couldn't go ahead. Questions were asked and answers given, and within twenty-five minutes the whole briefing was concluded. The pilots strolled out of the Squadron Office and across the grass border towards the apron where the Vampires, loaded with four rockets each, were standing waiting.

There was a briskness about the pilots, an impersonal efficiency that had no relationship with their personal opinions about the recent dispute. In fact, listening now to their talk you might think they were wholly unaware of such a conflict. A sergeant pilot had started a string of teasing remarks about the marksmanship of one of the newer members of the Squadron, and this had led to wagers being taken on the results of the afternoon's practice. The leader of Blue Section decided that nobody would remember all the wagers. "Anybody who doesn't get at least one direct hit in the afternoon will have to stand all the others a round of drinks tonight" was his suggestion. This was greeted with shouts of approval as they broke away from their tight little bunch and spread out along the line of waiting aircraft.

Parsons had heard such talk on many occasions. He wondered if it were part of the make-up of the other Services also. Or was it peculiar to the R.A.F., this cool, impersonal putting aside of personal opinions?

He wondered if in the other Services you could tell from a man's behaviour in the Mess what kind of soldier he would make in action. You couldn't always tell in the R.A.F. It was something to do with the newness of the Service, the speed at which new developments were constantly being made, the very strangeness of the element in which they fought. And, even more, it was to do with the fact that their fighting was so interwoven with their private living. In a sense they were still explorers, a small, well-knit band of explorers, who might hold the whole shape of the future in their hands. It was like no other Service, for a man could be with his wife and family for a meal and then in a few brief hours be away over the heart of enemy territory, waging a mixture of the most impersonal of all wars—bombing—and the most personal of wars—air-to-air combat. And in another few hours he could be back again with his family. Was it because of these swift changes that a special breed of men had grown up with the Royal Air Force? Men whose personal life flowed with youthful enthusiasm, but who could switch in a moment into the most solidly skilled hunter, old in knowledge and complex in accomplishments. Parsons stood for a moment and watched the last ribald gestures to each other as two pilots climbed into their cockpits. He knew that no sooner would their hands touch those controls than the banter would drop away and a new personality would take over. It always excited him, this change, and he felt it now as he walked towards his own Vampire where the Corporal and the young Cockney were waiting.

[2]

In Saltingsby village the lunch-hour had been funereal. On Tilney and Bookie's return, some of the village people had at first been angry with the Air Force decision, but that had soon evaporated into hopelessness. Bookie went off to his home to write out the claim which he intended forwarding to the Ministry for Land Acquisition, leaving Harry Tilney, Old Circular, Soapy, and a small group of people at Joe Bates' pub. Sally had drifted in and remained silently with them, and as the lunch-hour concluded others had gathered by the pub instead of returning to their places of work. It was hot now—hot as it had been for the past few days, but now with a gusty, smacking wind driving across the marshes. Even here in the sheltered Open Place stray gusts raced in around the church and blew an unaccustomed dust across the village. Swift changes of light followed each other as the low clouds seemed to jump over the sandhills and then scud away to the west, leaving the sun temporarily in occupation. The wind and the heat and their own thoughts made the growing crowd restless. Some outlet would have to be found for their feelings. The old clock in the church tower began to strike two o'clock, but part of the sound was borne away on the wind. Tom Wade heard it as he came in his small punt from the other end of the mere and moved towards the village. He saw the crowd, too, and wondered what had happened in the dispute. With redoubled energy he sent the craft across the choppy water and up into the reeds behind

the pub. He hastened around the path to the Open Place and at the corner of the pub, ran into Harry Tilney.

"Well, did you tell them? Did you tell the Air Force?" Tom demanded.

In a few angry, sullen words Harry Tilney told him the outcome of the interview.

"Now what are you going to do?" asked Tom.

"What can we do? There's only an hour left. At three o'clock they start firing on the range."

"What?" Tom almost shouted in his excitement. He grabbed hold of Tilney by the shoulders. "Three o'clock! Did you say three o'clock? Are you sure of that time?"

"What's wrong with you. Let me go." Harry struggled to free himself. But Tom's excitement was too intense, and, still holding Tilney, he repeated his question. Some of the crowd, attracted by his shout, gathered about them.

"Are you sure of the time?" demanded Tom.

Sally supplied the answer. "Yes, Tom. It is the only thing we did learn this morning. They are taking the Squadron out to fire on the range at three o'clock."

"Then we can stop them! We can stop them yet!" Tom Wade was shouting in his delight.

"How? How can we stop them?" the crowd demanded.

Tom quietened himself for a moment and looked about the crowd. Nearly thirty people were gathered and now the others came from the pub to see what was causing the excitement.

"Is the copper about?" asked Tom.

matter of seconds the whole mere was full of boats of every size and shape making at slow speed towards Wadely Broad.

The old men thought that every craft must have gone, but in fact there were two boats still stationary behind the pub. One was a small rowing dinghy owned by Bookie. The other was the launch owned by Joe Bates, which had been recovered and towed back to its moorings after Buster's unfortunate accident. Now, with Fanny sitting waiting, Joe Bates was still trying to start it. The rest of the boats were well out of sight, the sound of their engines too had died away, but still his launch refused to start. His temper was rising and he muttered threats against the absent Buster. Then there came a rustling through the reeds and an agitated Bookie arrived. He had just heard the news of what was happening and had come to try and stop them from doing such a foolhardy thing. An angry Joe Bates told him that he was too late. Bookie tried to argue with him and at least stop this pair from going, but the publican was not interested in the argument that their action was illegal or unfair to the R.A.F.

"If we can stop them, then we'll do it," he shouted at the old solicitor as he slammed the engine cover and sat once more in the driving seat. He pressed the starter and the boat shot away at a tremendous speed, catching Joe and Fanny unawares. Bookie watched and saw them regain control of the boat and send it chasing after the armada of boats that was now completely out of sight. Still muttering to himself about the rashness of their action, he stepped into his dinghy and went rowing off after the rest of his people.

Away across the marshes on the Island of Children, Flight Lieutenant Edwards came to the door of the Range Control hut and stood for a moment looking slowly around the extent of the range. In a direct line between himself and the sandhills lay the Small Wood and next to it the breeding-ground of the black-headed gulls. His gaze moved on, searching the sandhills where the two red danger flags blew vigorously in the wind, and then examining the wide corridor of open ground. There was no sign of life anywhere. Away at the other side were the targets, the one on the left set about fifteen yards from where the reeds began to circle the crescent-shaped water, and the second target over near the reeds which pushed out into the corner of the river. It was in this latter place that Soapy the eel-catcher had tried to squat. The village people had fought well, thought Edwards. He moved away from the door and, going behind the hut, mounted the bank beside the river. The reeds were bending before the wind and the water was choppy than he had known it, but of humans there was no sight. Satisfied that all was in order, he went back to the hut and contacted Flying Control on the field telephone.

"Just a last-minute check to let you know that everything is clear down here. The danger signals are in place, and there is no sign of anyone. Cloud is about the same, patchy and low." Flying Control reported that the Vampires were already running up and would be taxi-ing to take off positions in a matter of minutes. Edwards replaced the 'phone, and with his staff of airmen, settled for the short wait.

In spite of the strong wind and the fact that each

launch was towing a yacht or dinghy with passengers, the village armada had made good time on the journey towards the sanctuary. Once out of the mere, they were soon through the narrow channel and into the wide waters of Wadely Broad. Hugging the posts that marked the channel, they made the shortest route to the river and were well along it, just passing the point where it divided, so that one branch would flow past the Island of Children, when they heard the sound of Joe Bates' launch coming up fast behind them. They were packed solidly on the narrow water, and their wakes, pushing up against the close banks and bouncing back on the following boats, made the journey one that needed constant attention if there were to be no collisions. Into this melee of craft raced the launch with the publican at the wheel. He had by now, with the vocal assistance of Fanny, discovered that he had no more control over the launch than had Buster a few days before. As he came roaring up behind the other launches, he managed to convey by wild wavings of his arms what had happened. Harry Tilney had heard the story of Buster's mishap and, realising at once that the story was being repeated, shouted the word along for the boats to clear a path for the launch. Through them, throwing up great waves of spray, sped the launch and roared on towards the sanctuary. The other boats continued at a more sedate pace past the Air Ministry warning notices that lined both sides of the river. The presence of the notices began to imprint upon them the danger in the action they were taking, and as each notice dropped astern of them, the spirit of the body of people changed almost imperceptibly to one of

dogged determination. Gone now was the first excitement. Now they knew their danger and had time to consider. Steadily the boats rode forward.

Twisting through the channel in the forest of reeds, they came to the shallow corner of the river where Soapy's houseboat had once briefly rested. A recently gashed path in the reeds showed them where Joe Bates had gone ashore, and as they came in to land they saw the stern of his launch protruding amongst the reeds. He and Fanny joined them now, the publican still muttering angry threats against Buster. Some of the boats were still arriving and Harry Tilney left Tom Wade to deal with these, suggesting that most of the people should come ashore while a few remained to anchor the boats along the waterway, with sails hoisted to attract attention from the air. Then Tilney led the first wave of people through the damp, squelchy reeds towards the targets. At their coming, a great cloud of birds rose from the crescent-shaped waters and went squawking and calling in a high circle above the sanctuary.

It was this burst of bird sound that first attracted the attention of Flight Lieutenant Edwards and brought him to the door of the range hut. For a second or two he stood just inside the door watching the hundreds upon hundreds of birds circling above him. Then, as he moved outside to inspect it further, he stopped suddenly, unable to believe what he was seeing. Away in the far corner by the river a crowd of people were thronging in from the reeds and spreading out towards the targets. There must be thirty or forty people, he thought, with more coming from the reeds at every

moment. He turned and rapidly ordered the Corporal to get Flying Control on the 'phone at once. Impatiently he waited while the airman tried to do so. There was no reply. He took the 'phone from the operator and tried for himself. A few seconds were enough to satisfy him that the line was dead. Frantically they began a check of the equipment, but there was no fault in the 'phone or the terminals at the hut.

They could not check as far as the channel, where a torn wire trailed from leaning posts. It had been carried away by Joe Bates' launch.

"I can't let the bloody fools kill themselves," snapped the Range Controller grimly. "I'll get rid of them somehow." He took a Verey pistol and several spare cartridges and hurried from the hut.

Harry Tilney stopped the villagers from bunching up in one group, and spread them out about the two targets, with a thin scattering of people linking them in the space between the targets. The last of the boats had arrived and he could see the sails of some of the boats flapping whitely on the river. He looked around the crowd, now about fifty strong. Silently, in small knots of twos and threes, they stood facing away towards distant Saltingsby. The sun was shining again catching the bright colours of their early summer clothes and somehow accentuating their smallness as they waited there against the green background.

Flight Lieutenant Edwards didn't wait until he had covered the full distance between the hut and the group, but began waving and calling to them as he approached. Harry Tilney saw him coming, but

ignored his shouts until the Air Force man was quite near them.

"Get away. Get away all of you. Do you want to be killed?" shouted Edwards.

Tilney reassured the Norfolk people and asked Edwards who he was. An argument developed between them, but Tilney insisted that they would not move. The land was Church land and the R.A.F. had no right to it. He and his people were determined to stay here—if necessary until the matter was settled. Edwards finally realised that nothing he could say would shift these people. His references to the danger, however, affected some of the people. They had realised for some time that they were taking a risk, but now that it had been put into words by the R.A.F. officer, it suddenly assumed a definite, more concrete, shape. Tilney realised what was happening and moved out in front of the crowd to give them confidence again.

"Don't worry, lads," he called. "Air Force wouldn't shoot at us." He stood and watched them, waiting for signs of panic, but there were none. His wife came and stood beside him and took hold of his arm. Over near the second target he could see the workmen from his boatyard, and just beyond them was Soapy the eel-catcher. Near them, in front of the second target, a small group was gathered behind Tom Wade. Men and women, some holding each other's arms, stood in threes and fours all along the target area. He looked at the other target, nearer to him, and saw Sally standing quite still beside her father and already watching the low sky. Near her was Fanny Bates and Mrs. Thompson, and scattered around them, another fifteen people were

grouped in couples. Harry looked beyond them to the crescent-shaped water and was aware that the birds had settled down once again, and now they too were quietly waiting, as though drawing comfort from a sharing of their danger with these humans. The whole village must be here, thought Harry as he raised his voice to call to them again.

"As soon as the planes begin to dive, everyone start waving. Use handkerchiefs or scarves if you have them. It'll help them to see us," he called. Then he turned again to face the sky from which the aircraft must come, a sky that was now suddenly deprived of sun again as more low cloud came scudding swiftly across the coast.

Sally realised after a moment that her feet and hands were quite cold, almost without feeling. But she made no attempt to bring back the circulation. It seemed pointless, somehow. Everything was unreal, outside her feeling, even her arms and legs and the gusty wind blowing here on the hot marshes. There seemed to be a lot of people about her. She was sure that if she turned her head she would find her father standing beside her. But she didn't turn her head. It was like knowing that you are dreaming, but will wake up in a minute. It was a strange dream, for Bill had no part in it. Or had he? Hadn't Bill said once that we should all be part of what is happening about us, part of the present that is shaping the future? Hadn't he said that she was in a world of the past? That wasn't true any longer, she realised, as her mind began to clear a little. She was no longer in that old world. She was part of the present now, part of the fear that her people were sharing. Here

at this moment she was being born into today; born into it as a much more mature person. She knew she was frightened, but just as surely she knew that she would not run away. Would Bill expect her to run away? She knew now how unfair she had been to him; knew that he was part of the present conflict, but not therefore necessarily an enemy. She wanted him with her now.

She was alive now to what was happening and caught the slight movement through the hushed crowd as someone thought they heard the first sound of aircraft. Everyone strained, but there was no sound yet. They waited, uneasiness stirring through their groups as the moments became longer. Tom Wade felt it and looked about him and was excited. Here was danger again and that thrill of fear. He hadn't felt this in years. And it was greater than the normal thrill of battle, for then he had mostly been risking only his own life. Now he had put the whole village in danger by his idea, and they were standing about him, defenceless before the oncoming aircraft; bright, screaming metal armed with rockets. He caught the first strong note pulsing somewhere above the clouds.

"There they are!" he called on a rising excitement.

Soapy gulped nervously. "You would hear them before anyone else."

The information spread quickly from group to group, and then the sound became strong enough for all to hear.

"I wish those clouds weren't so low," muttered a man.

"You mean they might not see us?" queried Mrs. Thompson.

Joe Bates cast a longing look towards the river. "I wonder if I should have a look at the boat," he half suggested, but made no move to carry out his wish.

The rest of the crowd were silent. No sound came from the birds behind them. Only the reeds cried their warning. Sally slid an involuntary hand into her father's as the sound above them increased.

"They are circling." The information passed from group to group.

Out in front of the crowd, Flight Lieutenant Edwards loaded the Verey pistol and waited tensely.

[3]

It was a minute or two before three o'clock when the Group Captain returned from Group Headquarters and walked into his own office at Fallowfield. The Adjutant was standing by the V.H.F. set which was switched on. "Are the boys at it?" asked the Group Captain briskly as he tossed his briefcase on to his desk. The Adjutant came forward to help him out of his flying jacket and told him that the two sections were over the target now and that they should be making the first run at any minute. Briefly he related the news of the morning's visit by the three people from the village, and the Group Captain was relieved when he heard the decision that Squadron Leader Parsons had made. He had learned while at Group Headquarters that their overseas posting was a matter of urgency, and any

further delay would have been considered more than just inconvenient.

From the speaker attached to the V.H.F. set came the voice of Parsons. "Archer Leader to Blue Section. There is much more cloud than I expected. Will do circuit now for you to drop astern. Then take up your position. Over."

From the leader of Blue Section came a laconic, "Roger, Archer Leader."

"Cloud?" asked the Group Captain.

"There have been reports of it since midday, sir. It blew up suddenly. Apparently it is fairly thin and broken though, and they . . ."

The 'phone shrilled, cutting short his comment. He answered it, and a second later handed it to the Commanding Officer.

It was the Station Signals Officer calling and reporting that there was a break in the line somewhere between Flying Control and the range. The Group Captain was immediately alert. The 'phone was the only means of communication with the range, and if that had gone he knew that he ought to cancel the operation. But the training was urgent, and surely nothing could be wrong at the range? "How long since you last heard from them?" he asked. The Signals Officer told him that they had received a report from the range about ten or fifteen minutes before in which they had reported that all was clear. What should they do? queried the officer. Ask Flying Control to bring the aircraft back to base?

From the speaker on the wall came Parsons' voice again. "Blue Section from Leader. What is your

position?" After a tiny pause came the reply. "Am standing by two miles up-sun. Will follow you in. Over."

The Group Captain thought quickly and made up his mind. "They are just about to start the dive. Let them go in." He replaced the 'phone and hoped that he had made the right decision.

Squadron Leader Parsons caught a glimpse of Blue Section well away to his left as the sun gleamed momentarily on their aircraft. Then he glanced over his shoulder at his own section. Yes; there was his Number Two in perfect position. He was running up towards the range now, and through gaps in the clouds far below him he could make out the sandhills on the coast and away behind them parts of the river that twisted away at the other side of the range. Below and in front of him, a puff of cloud blew swiftly across his vision and he caught a glimpse of the white targets looking like tiny pin-points two miles below in the world of green. It was blue and high here in this world of space, and only the lightest of breezes came across the sea. He went through his cockpit drill. Everything was in order. He called up Flying Control and advised them to tell Range Control that they were about to start the dive. Confirmation of his message came through. They were in almost perfect position. Now was the moment.

"All right, Red Section. Here we go."

Forward and over, the port wing dipping away as the aircraft peeled off and dropped away to the targets. Down, down, she floated in a lovely, long, shallow dive. Below him wisps of cloud flew very quickly across

the green, like some shadow projected too quickly from a movie projector. But always as these lights danced away from before him, the white pin-point was there again, coming up to him, growing slightly larger all the time. A glance revealed his altitude as eight thousand. The left hand target was in his sights now. Steadily there. No, not so steadily. There was a strong cross wind which was buffeting his aircraft and making it harder to hold on target. He kept checking as he felt the drift. Now he had the measure of it and was able to anticipate the thrusting wind and keep that white dot smack in the centre of his sights. It was rushing up towards him now, growing larger and larger. Around it everything was green. The excitement filled him as it always did. He knew he would be able to put his salvo smack in the middle of that target. Not much longer now. The steady white was growing larger against the green.

But the green was moving.

Strange the tricks of light one encountered. . . . My God! There was something! He peered harder. A lot of coloured dots. They were waving. People! Christ, the fools! The bloody fools! His voice choked as he savagely switched on his radio.

"Don't fire! Don't fire!" His voice broke with agony. "The target is jammed with people. Do not fire! Have you got that. Over." In a tumult of fear, he watched the people below as he waited for the answers. They had heard him, thank God. Then he realised that he was still diving. My God, he was low. Was he too low? His drill flowed through him, submerging the instinctive reaction. Slow, easy with that stick.

Pull her too hard and you'll break her. He knew his body was growing more and more tense as the sweat stood out all over him. She was coming up now. But she was low. She was dreadfully, agonisingly low. Would he still hit something as he scooped out of the dive? He almost tucked his legs up, fearing in a ridiculous flash that he might scrape the people below him. Then the reeds and the water slid away beneath him and ahead the first edge of the sky came in over the top of his cockpit. He was climbing again. He looked quickly over his shoulder and the others were there. Thank God it was his own section that had been flying behind him. What would a strange section have done? He felt a tremendous gratitude for his fliers; he had known it often during the war. He switched on his radio and called up Blue Section.

Sally and Tom Wade were the only two still on their feet as the last aircraft skimmed over them and climbed away. Tom stood rigid, thrilled by the nearness of catastrophe, wondering for a flashing, scared moment if the aircraft would pull out of the dive in time. Sally was standing quite erect, terrified, but trying to control her fear. She had wanted to run or to throw herself flat on the ground like the rest of the people, but even in her fear she knew that she was doing this to prove something to Bill. In those long moments of fear, as the aircraft had come screaming, screaming down, she thought nothing of the reason why she was here, nothing of the birds, nothing of the dispute, the whole battle between herself and the aircraft had resolved itself into the question of whether she could live up to a new standard, a standard that had shaped itself

out of her talks with Bill. She kept telling herself that she had chosen a course of action and must follow it through because she believed it. She could respect herself then ; and Bill would respect her. That was why she couldn't run, mustn't run. Oh, 'God, she was afraid. But she hung on to herself, willing herself to stand erect as the rockets, gleaming under the aircrafts' wings, aimed the whole of themselves and the aircraft straight at her face. After an eternity, an eternity that thundered past with a gust that nearly knocked her off her feet, the aircraft were gone. Vaguely she became conscious of frightened, embarrassed people coming to their feet around her.

The clouds moved swiftly away again, flooding the range with a huge spotlight, illuminating every man's fear. Fanny was still unable to raise herself from the ground. Tilney and his wife came slowly to their feet. From behind a target crawled the eel-catcher, Soapy.

Sally stood silently in front of the target and very soon the tears began to flow ; soundlessly, endlessly, without any trace of emotion, they streamed down her face.

For long moments no one spoke. The sounds of the aircraft were diminishing. High above in a clear patch of sky the aircraft formed up and turned away towards Fallowfield. They were going home. The aircraft were going home. Most of the people noted the fact, but there was no sense of victory in them. Now they were beginning to feel the after-effects of their experience. Fanny Bates and Mrs. Thompson were still crouched on the ground, and as each minute passed their shame grew greater than their fear, until they felt that they

would never again be able to stand erect. Mrs. Tilney, when she saw the planes going away, began to tremble violently with relief that it was all over. Quite suddenly she had to sit down again, and her husband attended her, trying to stop the sobs that were shaking her whole body. Now that the tension of danger was past, others began to feel similar reactions. In twos and threes they sat dazedly on the warm turf. Others, more used to air attacks because of their Service experience, wandered aimlessly, not knowing what to do. Flight Lieutenant Edwards was still standing in front of the crowd, his reloaded Verey pistol held ready for further warnings. Tom Wade realised now in retrospect that he had seen the officer fire it several times as the planes had burst through the last low cloud. Tom felt his excitement draining away and an emptiness taking over.

The wind gave one last boisterous chase across the marshes, and then dropped away. The reeds held themselves quite motionless, accentuating the appearance of deadness that had settled across the whole sanctuary. In the still, strange atmosphere, Sally ceased to weep and began to shiver. Her father, knowing intuitively not to speak to her while the tears still flowed, now came and put his coat about her. The air of the place became chilly with something that had no relation to the temperature. It was as though Time was standing still, hanging there in the tragic, troubled air, and that if they did not move away now they would have to remain there forever, a part of the legends, the deaths, the invasions that made up that sad place.

A few of the men began to drift towards the river, and without conscious words the crowd followed them.

Soon they were all silently in their boats and moving slowly away down the river.

On the Island of Children the sound of the birds came once more to cheer the speckled sunshine. And as the last noise of the village boats died away, Flight Lieutenant Edwards returned to the range hut.

CHAPTER VIII

[1]

IT was two days later, and in the pub another memorable evening was getting under way. Harry Tilney almost regretted that it wasn't a Red Thursday. But they found many things to which they could drink a toast. Bookie, at first angry with them because of the illegality of their action, was once again their friend. And now they were able to laugh at the memory of how, as they came back from the sanctuary, they had passed an exhausted Bookie sitting in his dinghy at the other end of Wadely Broad. Those who had been most frightened soon forgot their experience when they knew that there was nothing different about them, when they knew that others had felt exactly as they had. The evening advanced several hours beyond opening time, and another round of drinks had just been bought and raised once more on high to the toast of "The result of the Public Enquiry" (for it was now known that one would be held), when the door of the other bar opened and the faces of Squadron Leader Parsons and the Adjutant appeared at the serving hatch.

Joe Bates moved along the bar to serve the officers as an embarrassed quietness settled through the public bar. Then Harry Tilney, with one of his impulsive gestures, pulled open the door to the other bar and greeted the two Air Force men and invited them to

have a drink with him. After an initial reluctance, they came into the public bar and joined the crowd.

"There's no hard feelings, is there?" enquired Tilney as he ordered drinks for them.

"Well, you're lucky to be alive," answered Parsons.

"Just think how my boys would be feeling now if they had killed any of you." His voice was thick with emotion as he continued: "Some of them were pretty shaken. Some of them still are bloody shaken. They don't feel like celebrating." A warning nudge from the Adjutant stopped him.

He kept the conversation off the incident for a few minutes after that, and they talked self-consciously of other things as they sipped their drinks. The Squadron Leader obviously had something he wanted to say to them, and they began to wish that he would say it. Anything would be better than this forced politeness. It was Fanny who gave the opening. She came in from the room behind the bar, and at the sight of the officers greeted them with delight.

"Hello, Mr. Parsons," she cried. "Have you come to say goodbye?"

Squadron Leader Parsons looked at her in some surprise. "How did you know we were leaving?" he asked.

Fanny giggled and stepped back from the bar, opening the door that led to the private room behind it. There, sitting on either end of the couch were Buster and Flight Sergeant Campbell, both dressed in their best uniforms. They were glaring at each other, obviously neither being willing to give way and let the other have the pleasure of Fanny's private company.

She closed the door and returned to the bar. "They say the result of the enquiry won't be known for about a year and a half, Mr. Parsons. Is that right?"

"About that," he agreed.

"Well," smiled Fanny. "You might all be back by then."

The crowded bar were suddenly aware of these and her previous words. What was this talk of goodbyes and going away? Harry Tilney asked the question, but before the Air Force men could reply Fanny had supplied the answer.

"The Squadron goes on leave tomorrow, and then overseas. It was announced officially to them today."

Overseas! Quickly the men in the bar exchanged glances. Did that mean action, wondered Tilney. He caught Old Circular's eye, and both men were uncomfortable with their half-knowledge. It was Tom Wade who broke the silence by asking where the Squadron was going.

"Malaya." Parsons dropped the word into their discomfort, trying to keep his voice noncommittal. The word echoed through them as they recalled recent headlines of further killings out there in that jungle country. And these boys, all of them, Bill and Buster, and the pilots . . . would they be sent there now without proper training? What had their actions led to? The silence was too much for Parsons. "That is why I came in here tonight. I wanted to say goodbye and let you know where we were going." He looked around at their faces—faces that were a mass of conflicting thoughts. "All right," he told them, "you have your sanctuary, your Island of Children, but you know now

what it has cost us. You know now why we told you that training is always given top priority, why nothing is allowed to interfere with it."

Tilney interrupted him. "But you won't be sent overseas without training?"

"No. It is not as bad as that. Tomorrow we go on leave, and then we will have to move to another range. That will mean more delay before we are ready to go out to Malaya. And every day more soldiers are being killed and more planters and their wives are being murdered. Only air attack can really strike at those jungle camps and keep the terrorists on the move. That is why our training was so urgent."

Tilney wasn't certain of his own case, but he was not taking this without a protest. "But a few days can't make all that much difference."

"Perhaps not to us. But there is so little land available for training ranges in this country that when we move to the other one for our training, some other Squadron will have to wait. Their delay will be more than a month. Maybe their task is just as urgent as ours. Who knows? I don't, and you certainly don't." He turned away from them to pick up his glass, but played with it for a moment on the bar. The silence was absolute. His next words were as much to himself as to the others, and it sounded to them as though he was repeating some words that had been told to him over and over:

"We haven't always as much time as we think."

He turned back to them and surveyed their faces. Each was uncomfortable, uncertain, puzzled by the consequences of his action like a child who has

Barely audible against the wash of the sea, Sally's voice came to him from a foot away. "Maybe by the time you get back, we'll know about the Island of Children."

"At least you have gained a year or more of time," his arm, already about her waist, tightened in comfort.

She returned the pressure, but her voice dropped in key. "You don't gain anything without losing something," she murmured.

"Perdita?"

She nodded, and then suddenly turned and clung to him, all her endeavours at calmness melting away in a rush of emotion.

"And now you. Oh, Bill!"

They clung together for a moment before her voice came up to him, muffled by his chest. "Don't get shot or anything, Bill."

The pathetic words made him want to smile and say something cheerful, but his heart wouldn't let him. He knew what would happen in a minute, knew that he would not be able to stop himself. Was this ache, this lump inside of him the reason why so many goodbye scenes had ended thus throughout eternity? He forced himself to answer her:

"I'll probably never be in as much danger as you were the other afternoon."

She felt his heart pounding and heard the thickening of his voice, but did not ignore where it was leading.

"We had to do it, Bill."

She raised her head and looked at him in the soft half-light. For a moment she couldn't see his eyes, but with her face upturned to the sky he could see hers.

"So did we, Sally. The wonderful thing is that we were both right."

"Yes."

There was a moment in which they stood there for years, reading a lifetime in each other's face. Then he was kissing her eyes, her ears, her face and her neck. She trembled, half-whimpering, half-pleading, but he silenced her mouth with a long, long kiss. Then he picked her up and carried her along the sands, away from the path.

Much later, still lying there with the stars shining over his shoulder into her face, they heard Old Circular return along the beach and go up to the lighthouse.

Bill knew that he would come back from Malaya. Wherever he was sent, he would always come back. He knew about that with a certainty that he had not known about anything else, except his desire to fly. And Sally, thinking of the time she had tried to obliterate the sky from his mind, knew now that it was not necessary. Bill would always be chasing the furthestmost parts of the sky, but part of him would always be with her. To know and to have that part of him was now enough. She was a child no longer; she had grown up and learned to share.

They went up to the lighthouse and Bill said good-bye to Old Circular. Her father thought at first that she was taking the separation calmly, but a further glance showed a new strength whose depth and reason he understood in a way that comes only from the years.

Sally walked with Bill only as far as the gate that led from the small garden. Behind her the open door let out a long finger of light that reached across the gate

and faded away down the dark path to the beach. Bill was walking down the path now, gradually losing the pale light and becoming a darker shadow against the surrounding darkness.

She watched and listened until, standing there on the coastline, she could hear him no more. Only the sounds of Norfolk came to her now ; the soft, erasing wash of the waves on the clean, white beach, and away beyond them those other sounds from the marshes. The sound of the reeds, timeless sentinels of the stretching flatness ; and from over at the sanctuary known as the Island of Children, the night sounds of birds. Sounds, these, that had echoed across this place since before the days when the Romans had buried their children in a beautiful shallow lake, and where, two thousand years ago, a group of people had been saved by a child called Perdita.

THE END

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